

Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome

Rebecca Langlands



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EXEMPLARY ETHICS IN ANCIENT ROME

This ground-breaking study conveys the thrill and moral power of the ancient Roman story-world and its ancestral tales of bloody heroism. Its account of 'exemplary ethics' explores how and what Romans learnt from these moral exempla, arguing that they disseminated widely not only core values such as courage and loyalty, but also key ethical debates and controversies which are still relevant for us today. Exemplary ethics encouraged controversial thinking, creative imitation and a critical perspective on moral issues, and it plays an important role in Western philosophical thought. The model of exemplary ethics developed here is based on a comprehensive survey of Latin literature, and its innovative approach also synthesises methodologies from disciplines such as contemporary philosophy, educational theory and cultural memory studies. It offers a new and robust framework for the study of Roman exempla that will also be valuable for the study of moral exempla in other settings.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Back in 1994, when I was embarking on my postgraduate studies in Cambridge and expressed an interest in studying heroic women in ancient Rome, my then supervisor Philip Hardie took down from a shelf in the Classics Faculty Library an old brown book falling apart at the spine and handed it to me, saying he thought I might find something interesting in its pages. The book was Kempf's 1888 Teubner edition of Valerius Maximus' *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* (then the only edition available of the work), and this turned out, though I didn't know it then, to be a defining moment for my career as a Classicist. Lured in by these extraordinary, entertaining and often perplexing tales, and the alien moral world they seemed to open up for me, I went on to spend several years working on a PhD thesis on gender and exemplarity in the work of Valerius Maximus. But before I got stuck into writing about the text itself, I spent much of my first year of doctoral studies reading and reading, as one does, in an ultimately fruitless quest to get to grips with the broader subject of moral exempla as an educational and ethical resource. I wanted to know: How did they work? How was one expected to learn from them? How did they inculcate moral principles or encourage certain types of behaviour?

I found nothing written on this subject in relation to the exempla of ancient Rome; scholarship within Classics tended then to be limited to describing the function of exempla within ancient rhetoric, as a means of illustrating or enlivening argument. I was able to find, however, some interesting studies from other disciplines, which did begin to consider the moral function of exempla in later periods: Peter von Moos' analysis of the deployment of *exempla* in John of Salisbury's twelfth-century ethical treatise *Policraticus*, Karlheinz Stierle's discussion of the relationship between history and exempla, Timothy Hampton on the rhetoric of exemplarity in Renaissance literature, and Larry Scanlon on medieval

exempla, and best of all John Lyons' rather literary study of exempla in Early Modern literature.¹ What was notable about these studies from my perspective, however, is that they all implicitly, if not explicitly, characterised Roman exemplarity as prescriptive, uncritical and doctrinaire, in contrast to the authors, genres and periods that were the subjects of their own study. Their descriptions of the emergence of critical, sophisticated recognition of the problems of exemplarity – whether by Erasmus, Boccaccio, Cervantes, Montaigne or Derrida – rested on an implicit reference to former periods of exemplary dogmatism (often lumping together Roman and medieval uses of exempla). Every Renaissance or Enlightenment 'crisis of exemplarity', when new modes of critical thinking and the emergence of the autonomous subject rendered exempla newly problematic or even redundant, supposed a preceding period when there was no crisis, but merely complacent conformity to exemplary discourses. Scanlon describes the exemplum as 'a form particularly suited to indoctrination' (Scanlon 1994: 33). Years later, in an insightful discussion of such tendencies in the scholarship, J. Allan Mitchell, writing in defence of medieval exemplarity, noted that the term exemplum 'has become a term of invective in so much criticism'. In the minds of many scholars, 'exempla simply circulate past prejudices'.²

Yet it was clear to me, as I progressed in my doctoral research, that Roman exemplarity was as rich, stimulating and *critical* as the deployment of exempla that were described in the Early Modern and Enlightenment periods. Erasmus may have been acclaimed by Lyons as 'explosively inventive' because he expressed awareness that the same exemplum can be interpreted in many different ways depending on the context in which it is set (Lyons 1989: 18), but such awareness had already been expressed by Latin writers of the first century CE. The Romans also expressed awareness that the relevance of exempla changed over time, and might be radically disrupted by radical social and political change; that the equivalence between past and present was fragile and problematic; that political and social change rendered old exempla redundant; that it was impossible to live up to one's models; that exemplarity was doomed to failure; that there was an irresolvable tension between the conformity and the exceptionality that exemplarity demanded. All these anxieties and many more that were

¹ Stierle 1970, van Moos 1984 (with very belated thanks for Robert Travers for drawing my attention to this article back in 1995!), Lyons 1989, Hampton 1990, Scanlon 1994.

² Mitchell 2004: 9.

the focus of discussion in later periods were to be found in the Latin literature, as well.

My PhD did little more than scratch the surface when it came to answering my questions about how exempla work within a moral system, how one learns from them, and why imitation of exempla need not lead to loss of independence or individuality. But in the intervening years, as I concentrated on other projects, these questions continued to bubble away at the back of my mind, and years later I took up this project again, determined to address them more convincingly. I have now taken the time to delve more deeply into areas of scholarship outside my own discipline that seem to me to have a bearing on the study of Roman exempla; these include philosophy, cultural memory, folklore studies, psychology and educational theory. All this has taken time, and I could not have researched and written this book without substantial periods of research leave supported by the University of Exeter and by the AHRC. I also benefited immensely from spending time at the University of California, Los Angeles in 2014–5 as the Joan Palevsky Visiting Professor in Classics, where I had the luxury of teaching a graduate seminar in Exempla and Ethics that allowed me to explore the topic with a fantastic group of graduate students. That year spent in Los Angeles with my family was a wonderful boost in all sorts of ways: the sunshine, sea and mountains, the farmers' markets of Santa Monica, and the warmth of the welcome from the Classics department at UCLA. Special thanks to Francesca Martelli, Alex Purves, Amy Richlin and their families, and the other friends we all made there.

In the first years of research, as I began to probe the philosophical aspects of exempla, the encouragement of Hannah Dawson was invaluable; she insisted that I read Aristotle, persuaded me that my ideas about Roman exemplarity were relevant to the wider philosophical tradition, and was willing to spend hours in intense discussion on the fringes of family parties, helping me scribble out ideas on scraps of paper. Many of the key ideas in this book were forged during these conversations. I am also very grateful to Adrian Haddock for many stimulating and delightful (sometimes dizzying) conversations about examples and moral reasoning and for bibliographical recommendations, to Chris Gill for helping me to articulate how Roman exemplarity fits with ancient philosophical ideas, and to Ed Skidelsky for thought-provoking discussions about role-models ancient and modern. It has been extremely enlightening for me to think about Roman exempla within the context of modern social psychology and role modeling, and I am very grateful for Kim Peters for many conversations

about role models as we collaborated on the *Heroes and Leaders* project at Exeter, and for directing me to relevant bibliography in social psychology. I learnt a lot, too, from the *Heroes and Leaders: exemplarity and identity* workshop we co-organised at the University of Exeter in March 2013, which brought together colleagues from a wide range of disciplines (including philosophy, theology, history, modern languages, film studies, psychology and management studies) for a productive interdisciplinary conversation, and made it clear just how widely relevant the patterns of ancient exemplarity were.

Since I began to work in this field, studies of Roman exempla and exemplarity in general have burgeoned, and they continue to do so. The conference *Exemplarity/Singularity* organised by Michèle Lowrie and Susanne Lüdemann in Chicago in 2012 was a turning point for me; there for the first time I found myself in the congenial company of people who were absorbed in exploring the same knotty philosophical issues as I had long been, as they played out in literature from antiquity to the present day. I gained a huge amount from participation in the conference and its legacy has also been vital and sustaining: Michèle has continued to be a wonderful interlocutor on all things exemplary over the years; Matthew Roller has become a regular correspondent and has kindly shared drafts of his own work on exempla with me. I am especially grateful for the friendship of Alex Dressler, who provided copious, incisive, entertaining and brilliant comments on several draft chapters of this book – bedecking them with many more ideas than I could possibly do justice to; for these, and for hours of stimulating discussion about everything under the sun, but always circling back to Latin literature, I am very grateful, as well as, crucially, for his continued intellectual support and encouragement. Indeed, writing this book has been a long and daunting process, but my motivation has been periodically revitalised and maintained by inspirational scholars – among them in particular Katharine Earnshaw, Catharine Edwards and Francesca Martelli – whose interventions have encouraged me to feel that it is all worthwhile. Moreover, for twenty years I have been lucky to work in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Exeter – sustained, entertained and buoyed up by the best community of colleagues and students that anyone could wish for. My thanks to all of them, and to the family and friends who have brought me joy and solace along the way.

I am very grateful to several other people who have particularly helped with the tricky process of *writing*. Many years of co-writing with my friend and long-term collaborator Kate Fisher have greatly improved my skills of

argumentation; my mother Jane Rye made many interventions on final drafts of the whole manuscript to improve style and clarity; belonging to a writing group on Facebook has spurred me on (thanks to my *Writing Buddies* for the encouragement and motivation). I am especially grateful to the anonymous CUP readers who engaged so closely with both my initial proposal and the first manuscript draft and provided such detailed reports; their mixture of encouragement and criticism has ensured that this is a much better book than it might otherwise have been.

Perhaps it is the very nature of exemplarity and exempla that has meant that more than any other subject on which I have written it never seems possible to bring this study to an end. There is always another exemplum and its ethical implications to explore, always another ancient work bringing new perspectives on exemplary ethics, not to mention the continued publication of new studies by other scholars, which grapple in some way with the question of what exempla meant to the ancient Romans, a subject which has been gathering in intensity since I began my studies in this area more than twenty years ago. However, after many years of wrestling with this protean beast, I have provided, to my own satisfaction at least, a coherent and comprehensive account of what I have come to describe as 'Roman exemplary ethics', as a historical, philosophical, cultural, rhetorical and above all literary phenomenon. I have aimed to convey a sense of what is exciting about exempla, and I hope I have produced an enjoyable book, engaging with exemplary ethics and stories in a manner that also demonstrates the value of exemplary ethics in our own day and the enduring power and fascinating of the ancient tales. I have written the book that I would have liked to have been available to *me* when I was setting out to study Roman exempla all those years ago; I hope that it will prove valuable to others who are now embarking on the study of exempla and exemplarity in Latin literature and Roman culture, or who are studying moral exemplars in other settings.

Introduction

si tot exempla virtutis non movent, nihil unquam movebit.

‘If so many exemplary tales of virtue don’t move you, nothing ever will.’

Livy *Histories* 22.60.14

Tasting the Hero’s Blood

The well-known mythographer Marina Warner has described the process of reading fairy-tales and folk-tales as ‘tasting the dragon’s blood’ – a magical and transformative process by which one’s ears are opened to the voices of the past and of other worlds.¹ Roman exempla, which constitute a national storytelling tradition, are very different in many ways from the dream-like fantasies of fairy-tales and other narrative folk traditions that have been the subject of Warner’s studies.² In (supposedly) true stories from history, battle-hardened warriors, noble maidens and honourable sons of the soil face impossible dangers, take terrible decisions and sacrifice their lives, their limbs and even their own children for the sake of justice, discipline and the Roman community. Yet for the ancient Romans too, hearing the blood-soaked stories of their ancestral heroes was an intimate and potent experience, and this ‘taste of the hero’s blood’ had an intoxicating effect similar to the blood of Warner’s dragon: evoking other worlds, shaping understanding of their own world.

All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. I have used the Teubner or Oxford Classical Texts editions of Latin texts where possible. Primary source abbreviations in the text generally follow conventions from Lewis and Short’s *A Latin Dictionary* and Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon*.

¹ E.g. ‘Stories come from the past but speak to the present (if you taste the dragon’s blood and can hear what they say)’, at www.marinawarner.com/home.html

² For Warner’s substantial contribution to the study of the rich role played by fairy-tales in the Western tradition, see e.g. Warner 1994 on fairy-tales and fairy-telling; Warner 1998 on fear figures in Western storytelling; and most recently Warner 2011 on the tales of the *Arabian Nights*.

According to the descriptions found in ancient literature, exempla were capable of exerting an extraordinary, transcendent force upon those who contemplated them. The metaphors are often violent and uncomfortable. Exempla struck or dazzled the viewers, goaded and aroused them, inflamed the soul, and ultimately transformed them – through the process of emulation – into someone else, someone better.³ In the words of Valerius Maximus, whose *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, a compilation of exempla written in the first century CE, provides the most substantial surviving evidence about Roman exempla, ‘From such exemplary tales the goodness of the human race is nourished and augmented: these are the touch-papers, the spurs, by which the human race blazes with desire to do good and to deserve praise’ (*his et horum similibus exemplis beneficentia generis humani nutritur atque augetur: hae sunt eius faces, hi stimuli, propter quos iuvandi et emerendi cupiditate flagrat*, Val. Max. 5.2.ext.4).⁴

An important factor in their transformative effect was their emotional impact.⁵ For the second-century philosopher Favorinus, merely to read the centuries-old description by the famous historian Quadrigarius of the heroic duel between brave Manlius and the towering Gaul that had taken place five hundred years earlier was to be shaken and profoundly moved, as if he were present at the terrifying fight itself.⁶ Retelling such tales of daring and loyalty in his collection of exempla, Valerius Maximus writes of the joy, despair, horror, pity, awe and admiration that one experiences by turns as one contemplates his array of historical heroes and villains. ‘The spirit leaps up as it runs through memories of the greatest men’ (*exultat animus maximorum virorum memoriam percurrens*), he comments on his chapter of tales about heroes of Rome who displayed astonishing powers of abstinence and continence in relation to sex and wealth.⁷

³ E.g. ‘striking’: *pulsibus* (Sall. *Jug.* 4.5); ‘dazzling’ (Sen. *Ep.* 120.5); burning: *ardor* and *accenderet* (Pliny *Pan.* 13.5); key Latin terms are *stimulus*, *obstupefacio*, *pulsus*, *mirari*. See e.g. Cic. *Fin.* 3.32, 5.62 on the emotional impact of exempla. Cf. Guerrini 1981: 89, n.30 on the ‘metalinguistic’ quality (as he terms it) of terms such as *miror*, *mirus*, *horror*, *tristis*, *trux* and their derivatives. On the element of wonder, see Chapter 4.

⁴ Val. Max. 5.2.ext.4, writing specifically here about virtuous acts that incurred gratitude. See also 2.1.10 on competition for virtue, whereby young Romans were inspired by hearing about the deeds of their ancestors.

⁵ For the role of emotion in moral decision-making in Roman exempla and in modern psychology, see Chapter 4.

⁶ As Aulus Gellius writes, ‘The philosopher Favorinus used to say that when he read this passage in the book he was shaken and affected by emotions and blows no less than if he himself had been present watching them fight’: *quem locum ex eo libro philosophus Favorinus cum legeret, non minoribus quati adificque animum suum motibus pulsibusque dicebat, quam si ipse coram depugnantes eos spectaret* (Gell. *NA* 9.13).

⁷ Val. Max. 4.3.13.

Seneca describes Roman children as stunned and awestruck (*obstupefecerant, mirari*) when they listen to exemplary stories and learn from them about virtue.⁸ The effect of such stories on tender souls is dazzling and awe-inspiring⁹; learning from exempla is like ‘falling in love’ with the virtue they embody.¹⁰ For the men who were to become the great Republican leaders, it was enough to gaze upon the portraits of ancestral heroes, on display in the halls of their descendants, for their hearts to be inflamed with desire to equal the virtues of old; their own great achievements were directly inspired by exempla.¹¹ The encounter with exempla was the process by which Roman heroes were made; it was a process of awe and wonder, of ardour, self-scrutiny and revelation that transcends the rational and the logical, and constitutes what we might today describe as a spiritual experience.

This book takes as its starting point this transcendental power of Roman exempla, and asks: What did the ancient Romans learn from their exempla, and how did they learn from them? In pursuit of answers, I began my study with a comprehensive survey and analysis of Latin literature (and relevant Greek literature), examining how exempla were deployed in texts of all genres and periods, the detailed content and nature of Roman exemplary stories and figures, and the things that the ancient authors say about exempla and about how one learns from them (although these latter are rare). Early on it became clear that there was such a wealth of relevant material that I needed to limit the chronological scope of my enquiry, and so for the most part this study runs only up to the end of the first century CE, and there is also very little dating from before Cicero in the middle of the first century BCE.

From this survey of surviving Roman literature, I have been able to extrapolate a fully formed and coherent ‘exemplary ethics’ that was in operation in ancient Rome, and this book gives a full account of this ethics from literary, philosophical and cultural perspectives. It is an ethics based

⁸ For exempla as a kind of ‘wonder tale’, see further [Chapter 3](#).

⁹ Sen. *Ep.* 120 (discussed at length in [Chapter 3](#)).

¹⁰ On ‘falling in love’ with virtue through exempla, see Inwood 2007: 185 (where he explains his translation of *adamare* at Sen. *Ep.* 71.5) and 193 on Sen. *Ep.* 71.19: ‘The capacity for falling in love with virtue is based on our susceptibility to such examples.’ Cf. Scipio, rejoicing in the exempla that Virtus sets before him (Sil. *Pun.* 15.121–123).

¹¹ According to Sall. *Jug.* 4.5, ‘For I often heard that Q. Maximus, P. Scipio, and other leading men of our community used to say that when they gazed upon the masks of the ancestors, their soul was violently inflamed towards virtue. Certainly it was not the wax or its shape that had so much power over them, but that flame grew in the hearts of excellent men on account of the memory of great deeds, and it did not die down until their own virtue had become equal in fame and glory’ (*nam saepe ego audiui Q. Maximum, P. Scipionem, praeterea civitatis nostrae praeclaros viros solitos ita dicere, cum maiorum imagines intuerentur, vehementissime sibi animum ad virtutem accendi. scilicet non ceram illam neque figuram tantam vim in sese habere, sed memoria rerum gestarum eam flammam egregiis viris in pectore crescere neque prius sedari, quam virtus eorum famam atque gloriam adaequaverit*).

on a body of exemplary stories which are used as a medium for communicating not only moral values (such as ‘courage’ and ‘justice’) but also ethical issues and debates, as well as a complex of meta-exemplary principles that guide learners in handling exempla and implementing their lessons. These include sensitivity to the difficulties of interpreting exemplary deeds, awareness of the importance of motivation and especially awareness of situational variability, whereby virtues must be enacted differently depending on the circumstances. Although this ethics was never explicitly theorised by the Romans themselves, it was likely to have been in operation from long before the testimony of our earliest texts. It is also an ethics that resonates with Aristotelian ethical thinking and modern virtue ethics, and that was highly influential on later traditions, including early and medieval Christianity. Not only, then, does this constitute a distinctive, sophisticated and coherent ethics in its own right, it also has an important role to play in the history of Western philosophical thought.

In starting from the idea that exempla are primarily *ethical* stories, this study approaches exempla from a different angle from that adopted by most recent scholarship, which tends to begin from their role within rhetoric and historiography.¹² While scholars have focused on the political and rhetorical work that exempla are performing in ancient texts, they have neglected to ask a more fundamental question about their cultural value, with which this book is concerned.¹³ This book’s approach to exempla is not merely as instruments of persuasion, with which orators and politicians seek to indoctrinate and coerce the masses, but rather as a shared cultural resource with which different members of society engage actively in different ways. As we shall see, the rhetorical and persuasive functions of exempla are intimately entwined with the ethical, and not separable from it, as is the role of exempla in recording and commemorating the past; this study serves to further illuminate the roles played by exempla in ancient historiography and in ancient rhetoric. However, in taking *ethics* as my point of entry rather than rhetoric or historiography, this study thus

¹² Cf. Chaplin 2000: 5; Roller 2009; Gowing 2009; Maslakov 1984; van der Poel 2009. For the definitions of exempla in ancient rhetorical handbooks, see *Rhet. ad Her.* 4.62, Cic. *Inv.* 1.49 and Quint. *IO.* 5.11.1–2, with Lausberg 1998: 196–203. See Gazich 1995 for a nuanced discussion of the rhetorical aspects of exemplum in the context of an analysis of Propertius’ elegies. Cf. Morgan 2007a, which argues on the contrary for the ethical purpose of exempla in Roman culture and notes how odd it is that Valerius Maximus’ collection of exempla is assumed to be solely rhetorical in purpose (pp. 125–126).

¹³ My point here is similar to that made recently by Steinbock 2012 in relation to the cultural memory of ancient Athens.

underlines my commitment to the idea that the ethical value and role of exempla within Roman culture is primary, and that the historical and rhetorical are dependent upon this.

*

Chapter 1, ‘Roman Values and the Archetypal Exemplum’ is the first step in evoking the story-world of the Roman exemplum; it sets out to convey something of its excitement and magic, of the moral values associated with it and of its ethical power. To that end it introduces a particular type of exemplum that I take as archetypal, featuring prominent, Republican heroes such as Valerius Corvinus, Marcus Curtius, Fabius Maximus, Fabricius, Horatius, Horatius Coclus – the kind of famous ancestral heroes, in other words, who are frequently reeled off by the Romans themselves as their moral inspiration.¹⁴ Later in the book we will consider ways that this model changed and the kinds of exempla that do not fit within it, and other issues relating to social diversity, but it is important to lay this foundation for the study of exemplarity more broadly in Roman culture. Such stories remained foundational for so long within Roman culture, even as exemplary ethics changed and developed – even as their immediacy faded and new stories took their place.

This first chapter introduces the Roman exemplum as a particular literary and cultural form: a concise and punchy moral story with certain characteristic features. Analysis of three typical exemplary stories – those of the heroic deeds of Valerius Corvinus, Curtius and Mucius Scaevola – enables us to establish the nature of the archetypal Roman exemplum and the moral values with which it is typically associated (not least for readers who are not already familiar with the Roman material): bold and decisive acts of patriotic self-sacrifice, always violent and usually disturbing. These are straightforward and snappy tales of Roman heroism, but already in this chapter it will emerge that Roman exempla are characterised by inherent tensions that are related to the very idea of exemplarity and of learning from exempla. These include Roman history’s perplexing moral recursive-ness, the recurrence of moments of crisis when heroes are required to save the city and the community, the clash between the self-promotion and self-abnegation of heroes, and the tension between each hero’s status as

¹⁴ Examples of this in Latin literature are far too numerous to be listed here, and many will be discussed in the course of this book. A representative example is found in Cic. *Sest.* 143: ‘Therefore let us imitate our own Brutus, Camillus, Ahala, Decius, Curius, Fabricius, Maximus, Scipio, Lentulus, Aemilius and many others who have established this state’ (*quare imitemur nostros Brutos, Camillos, Ahalas, Decios, Curius, Fabricios, Maximos, Scipiones, Lentulos, Aemilios, innumerabiles alios, qui hanc rem publicam stabiliverunt*).

outstanding individual and as member of a community, as both exceptional instance and as normative representative of virtue.

Roman exempla shared some of the ethical power and nuance of narratives from other story-traditions such as fables and parables. This is the subject of [Chapter 2](#), ‘The Special Capacity of Exemplary Stories’, which argues that exempla were the ‘lifeblood of ethics’ in ancient Rome. This chapter explains what is special about narrative as an ethical medium, and discusses the particular capacity of moral tales to play a role within cultures that is different from and complementary to other ethical media such as rules, guidelines and exposition. It draws on material from other story-traditions and scholarship from related disciplines for a better understanding of how exemplary stories and figures might contribute to ethical theory and practice in different cultures; in particular it uses comparison with features of Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhist tales and Confucian exempla, both story-traditions that are closely associated with philosophical traditions. In both cases, scholars have identified the exemplary tales themselves as a fundamental medium through which philosophical ideas are articulated and transmitted. These comparisons show how even stories that constitute a ‘popular’ ethical medium accessible to all members of a community do not necessarily embody ethical ideas at a lower level of sophistication than those of the philosophical and religious treatises where core ideas are articulated. In fact, this chapter argues that stories can have a special capacity for communicating complex ethical ideas without needing to resolve internal tensions, leaving room for multivalency within a single reading (simultaneous multivalency), as well as multivalency over time (serial multivalency). It is this capacity that underpins the success of Roman exemplary ethics.

[Chapter 3](#), ‘Exploitation, Participation and the Social Function of Exempla’, then explores the way that a body of moral stories as an ethical resource can be embroiled within the power dynamics and status hierarchies of a community. Like [Chapter 2](#), it approaches Roman exempla as a wisdom genre and uses comparative material from other storytelling traditions to help develop a framework within which we can understand aspects of Roman exemplary ethics even in the absence of direct testimony from the ancient world. This chapter responds to prevalent ideas about exempla as a prescriptive and top-down tool of social control. It explores the power dynamics that can be in play when exempla are used to inculcate certain types of behaviour, and seeks to counter the prevalent idea that exempla are necessarily a prescriptive and authoritarian mode of delivering moral education. One of the broader aims of this book is to demonstrate

that the dynamics of exemplary ethics are far more complicated than the prevalent top-down model allows for, and that, even within a hegemonic, authoritarian and conservative milieu, agency, resistance, exploration, moral reflection and moral transformation are always in play. This chapter establishes a model for making this case about Roman exempla in particular.

As we have seen, according to the ancients themselves, Roman exemplarity is experienced as a thrilling opportunity rather than as the deadening hand of prescriptive moralising. This [third chapter](#) makes the case that, despite the fact that exempla were shaped by the political agenda of particular powerful members of Roman community, at their core is a more fundamental *ethical* value which is limited neither by the political ends, nor the moralising ends, nor the rhetorical ends to which an exemplary tale may also be used again and again. The deployment of exemplary tales by the Maoist state in twentieth-century China in an attempt to shape the behaviour of Chinese citizens and inculcate Maoist ideologies provides an extreme comparison of the use of exempla by an authoritarian regime that can help us to understand both the mechanisms and motivations of use of exemplary stories by hegemonic powers. However, this case also usefully reveals the limitations of such authoritarian use of exempla and shows that exemplary ethics must always incorporate the possibility of resistance and reappropriation. The model offered by a study of Buddhist tales in contemporary Thailand by Justin McDaniel is then used to show how an ethical resource can function simultaneously in multiple ways within a community, providing different uses for different members, while binding them all into the same ethics. It suggests that we think in terms not of exploiters and exploited, but rather in terms of *participants* in exemplary ethics.

This idea of a body of exemplary stories comprising an ethical resource that is shared across a community to facilitate ethical learning, development and discussion among all kinds of different participants will underpin the discussion in following chapters. [Chapter 4](#), ‘The Experience of Learning from Exempla’, is the philosophical heart of the book and traces the complex process by which exemplary tales contributed to ethical learning and development in ancient Rome. This chapter outlines the various stages and aspects of moral learning that constitute exemplary ethics and the detailed moral framework within which members of the Roman community engaged with exemplary tales. Building on the idea that Roman exemplary ethics is a participatory rather than an exploitative mode of learning, this chapter focuses on the experience of the individual

engaging with exempla rather than on the intentions of those who deploy them.

This chapter argues that the learning process at the centre of exemplary ethics is richer and more interesting than it is usually assumed to be by modern scholars,¹⁵ and looks rather like the practical enactment of Aristotle's ideal moral education.¹⁶ Roman exempla inspire and teach by evoking an emotional response, often using wonder and horror to hook the learner; they encourage people to compare themselves to others, and they instil a desire to compete and to emulate others so as to attain the qualities of excellence that they see manifested in these individuals, by giving them a sense of the possibility of this attainment, by enabling them to gain an understanding of virtue in the abstract and by facilitating the testing and exploration of ethical ideas and assumptions. This model of moral learning is extrapolated from my analysis of the ancient texts, but it is elucidated further by modern philosophical discussion that explores various aspects of what I have called 'exemplary ethics' – that is to say, an ethics that is based on learning from and through examples and role models. These include modern discussions of Aristotelian virtue ethics and the 'exemplarist ethics' theorised by Linda Zagzebski. Each of these theorises the role of examples in moral learning in ways that chime with what we find in the Roman texts, and help to clarify how the Roman system might have functioned. Key features of Roman exemplary ethics that emerge from this study are those of creative imitation and critical thinking, which ensure that there is a degree of autonomy allowed for participants, even as they are guided by exempla.

The ethical imitation (*imitatio* or *aemulatio*) that is a key element of this learning process therefore has much in common with the literary *imitatio* much practised and theorised in ancient literature, which emphasised the independence and creativity involved in engaging with and reworking the words and ideas of one's literary predecessors.¹⁷ Viewing it within this particular ancient context allows us to recuperate 'imitation' from the prevalent post-classical viewpoint, which tends to see it as a conservative and mechanistic process, and exempla therefore as a prescriptive, top-down and inflexible teaching tool.¹⁸ Imitation has been especially deprecated in the light of the strong value attached in later, post-Enlightenment Western tradition to autonomy, independence and

¹⁵ See also Langlands [forthcoming](#).

¹⁶ A preliminary form of this argument is outlined in Langlands 2015a.

¹⁷ For a thorough discussion of this, see Russell 1979.

¹⁸ See, for instance, the assumptions that underlie Brown 1983, Lyons 1989 and Burke 2011.

individuality, with which it is seen to be at odds. Indeed, in the post-classical philosophical tradition ‘imitation’ is often a dirty word, implying deep conservatism, moral straightjacketing and repression of autonomy. An extreme but by no means unrepresentative expression of this idea is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s declaration, in his 1841 essay promoting ‘Self-Reliance’, that ‘imitation is suicide’. Commenting on this famous and often-cited line in the light of contemporary ethics, Jeffrey Stout has more recently argued that, while there is a danger that imitation of models becomes ‘slavish idolatry’ and ‘subservience’, what is required to combat this tendency is an appreciation of oneself and a cultivation of ‘self-trust’.¹⁹ As we will see, the Romans expressed similar anxieties about the potential difficulties and limitations of learning through exempla, and, importantly, offered practical strategies for combating such difficulties, if not overcoming them. This book will argue that for the ancient Romans ethical *imitatio* was not at odds with autonomy, but incorporated innovation, creativity and transgression just as literary *imitatio* did. Like the post-Enlightenment thinkers, Roman exemplary ethics, too, appreciated the need to strike a balance between the emulation of models of excellence and the need to retain a sense of one’s own individual nature and circumstance in relation to exempla.²⁰

Chapter 5, ‘Multiplicity, Breadth, Diversity and Situational Sensitivity in Exemplary Ethics’, further explores how these principles are communicated through our Latin texts, and also shows how they enable Roman exemplary ethics to incorporate diversity and to function across different sectors of society. In particular, sensitivity to individual circumstances, ‘situational sensitivity’, was at the heart of Roman exemplary ethics, represented as a vital principle and skill to be exercised in the process of learning from exempla and applying them to one’s own behaviour. This is the principle that it is important to be able to judge what the specific requirements of one’s own situation are when one is making a moral decision, and to tailor the requirements of one’s behaviour accordingly. This faculty of moral discrimination, to be refined over one’s life and continually sharpened on the whetstone of Roman exempla, is the critical faculty with which Romans learned to engage with their exempla, and it is similar to the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* or ‘critical thinking’.²¹ It is also linked to social diversity and

¹⁹ Stout 2004: 172.

²⁰ Indeed Stout’s ‘self-trust’ corresponds to the important Roman virtue of *fiducia* or *fiducia sui*, which I have discussed in Langlands 2011 as an important aspect of exemplary ethics.

²¹ For a preliminary outline of this argument, see Langlands 2015a. On a similar role for *phronēsis* in reading fables in Middle English literature, see Allen 2005: 12–18.

the widespread usefulness of exempla across the social spectrum as well as over time. This chapter also explores the important related roles that multiplicity plays in Roman exemplary ethics. For instance, the juxtaposition within individual texts or within the tradition as a whole of a range of different exempla relating to the same moral qualities helps to highlight situational diversity, as well as to prompt debates where stories clash with or nuance one another. The deployment of multiple exempla to illustrate a single moral category can also allow exempla to communicate a sense of the breadth and parameters of moral qualities. This helps individuals to situate themselves in relation to moral qualities and decide how best to enact them.

[Chapter 6](#), ‘Working Consensus around Roman Exempla’, picks up on the idea of exempla as a shared resource that was explored in [Chapter 2](#). As a practised system of virtue-ethics, Roman exemplary ethics bound members of the community together through shared stories, ethico-narrative motifs and moral structures. This chapter considers Roman exempla as a shared ethical resource around which a working consensus has been established within the community (a consensus which continues to be established and amended over time), which enabled communication about moral ideas between different members of the community. It argues, then, that exempla were able to deploy multiple functions within a community, which may be more or less appropriate at different stages in a person’s life. Their operation will depend enormously upon who is reading them and what their situation is, but all of these functions rely to an extent on a working consensus about what the story means and how valuable it is. In the formative stages of a Roman’s childhood, exempla might have played, for instance, a rather basic epistemological role, enabling a child to come to a preliminary understanding of what specific virtues were. As Romans progressed through their lives as moral beings, however, and developed more nuanced moral understanding, they could draw on exempla as a shared moral language that enabled them to discuss and explore moral ideas in more complexity, or to use exempla as cases to test precepts and definitions. Exempla were shared reference points that enabled discussion to take place at a range of different levels, from basic epistemological learning about virtues to high-level philosophical exploration (with parallels to the model of exemplarist ethics proposed by Linda Zagzebski).

[Chapter 7](#), ‘Indeterminacy of Exempla: Interpretation, Motivation and Improvisation’, shows how within this pragmatic working consensus there was always a level of indeterminacy of meaning, and that this was especially

associated with the exploration of motivation and the perspective of the interpreter. This chapter examines how different literary texts interpret the traditional and familiar story of Mucius Scaevola in different ways and so demonstrates the fundamental indeterminacy of the story's meaning. It argues that the ancient texts find focalisation an important interpretative tool, and often make it explicit that exempla can have different but equally valid meanings when viewed from different perspectives. An important argument in this chapter will be that the claims that ancient sources make about the hero's motivation play a most important role in guiding a reader's evaluation of the moral worth and significance of the heroic deed. Finally, this chapter suggests that this feature of Roman exempla may well be related to the skills that many Roman youths were taught to develop during their education in declamation, since probing and exploring possible motivations is a key skill used by declaimers. This chapter thereby situates these important features of the Roman exempla tradition within the context of the broader culture of Rome.

Turning to the field of cultural memory, [Chapters 8 and 9](#) propose and develop the idea of the 'site of exemplarity' as a tool for analysing the tradition surrounding each exemplum in Roman culture. This concept is then used to enhance our grasp of the embedded complexity found in exemplary tales and of its significance, and to provide further context for understanding the oscillation between consensus and indeterminacy that emerged from the previous chapters. [Chapters 8 and 9](#) draw on recent scholarship on cultural memory, and especially the work on 'remediation' by Astrid Erll, Ann Rigney and Laura Basu, in order to articulate how exempla were held as shared reference points within Roman cultural memory. They also make extended use of the comparison of the legend of Robin Hood in order to illustrate how such a site might be constituted for each member of the community. [Chapter 8](#), 'Sites of Exemplarity: Referentiality, Memory, Orality', starts from the simple problem that, in the literature that survives from ancient Rome, exempla usually appear not as a full narrative, but rather as much briefer references. This chapter proposes that the concept of the 'site of exemplarity' helps us to answer the question: To what, then, do these exemplary allusions refer? It provides a theoretical framework within which we can go on to study ancient literary references to exempla as part of a wider cultural phenomenon. [Chapter 9](#), 'The Dynamics of Cultural Memory: Forgetting, Rupture, Contestation', then explores some of the further implications of conceptualising the traditions surrounding individual exempla as sites of exemplarity within Roman cultural memory. In particular, it considers the processes of change that such sites undergo (including erasure and

forgetting) and their significance for our understanding of the wider context within which Latin authors are working.

[Chapter 10](#), ‘Changing Sites of Exemplarity: Two Case Studies’, takes two particular sites of exemplarity as case studies (that of Mucius and the less well-known case of the ‘smiling slave’ who was tortured to death by the Carthaginians) to explore how such development of sites might have worked in practice, and to consider what the specific mechanisms were by which stories were shaped and amended over time. This chapter also considers *why* these culturally charged stories changed, for instance in response to social and political change, to meet the needs of specific social groups and changing ideologies. The first case study demonstrates that even such a well-known tale as Mucius’ story is contested, and does not remain stable as a field of reference for Latin authors over the period from the age of Cicero to the end of the first century CE, but undergoes significant changes in response to a range of shifting factors. The second case study is the story of the anonymous slave who killed the Carthaginian leader Hasdrubal in 221 BCE, a tale that only crystallised into exemplary form in the first century (our earliest source is Valerius Maximus in about 30 CE). It provides further illustration of the way that exempla are formed through recycling cultural scenarios and motifs, but also powerful proof that exemplarity was not in decline in the first century, but was still drawing historical material into its orbit. This chapter endeavours to suggest some possible answers to the question of why sites of exemplarity change, drawing on models from cultural memory studies and combining them with the particular features of Roman history.

Expanding on the case studies of the previous chapter, [Chapter 11](#), ‘Diachronic Overview of the Exemplary Terrain’, provides an overview of the whole exemplary terrain from mid-Republic to the end of the first century, tracing the broader changes that took place over that period. These include the translation of aristocratic family exempla into a broader community framework; the increasing social inclusiveness and diversity among exemplary figures; the growing emphasis on personal or humane virtues and also on domestic setting for virtue rather than the battlefield; the intensification of philosophical as opposed to patriotic frameworks for establishing virtue; and the anxiety about the destruction of a functional communal exemplary system that is expressed by writers of the post-Domitianic period. However, this chapter also challenges some of the existing arguments about diachronic change, especially the idea that exempla went into decline in the first century CE. It identifies persistent features of exemplary ethics that scholars have often taken as signs of change or

crisis, but which are in fact part of the exemplary framework itself, such as the expression of anxiety about a mismatch between past and present that might render exempla obsolete, or challenges to the elitism of exempla. For experienced Latinists, this chapter might provide a useful introduction to the exemplary tradition as a whole, tracing as it does the broad background against which exemplary ethics developed. It also provides wider context for the individual uses of and allusions to exempla that are found in specific ancient texts, discussed throughout the book.

Taken together, all the previous chapters seek to build an integrated approach to the study of exempla in ancient sources, and to exemplary ethics more broadly, synthesising the approaches of philosophy, psychology, folklore studies, cultural memory studies, comparative religion and literature, and educational theory. The final two chapters go on to demonstrate how this integrated approach can be fruitfully applied as literary criticism to ancient literature. Chapters 12 and 13 provide a detailed discussion of the treatment of a selection of exempla in a range of ancient texts, and delineate the literary techniques used by Roman authors to engage with the exemplary tradition and terrain.

Chapter 12, 'Controversial Thinking through Exempla', develops a claim that is central to the overall thesis of the book that exempla were fundamentally 'controversial'. That is to say their content and significance were always sufficiently contested within the tradition as to invite debate and critical reflection; it is this quality that enabled them to play a more complex role in facilitating ethical debate even at a high level. The first two sections analyse Cicero's treatment of the exemplum of T. Manlius Torquatus in *De finibus* and then Livy's use of the exemplum of Regulus in the debate between Fabius and Scipio to show how a single exemplum can be deployed as a 'pivot' within a debate and how this role is facilitated by dynamic interplay between consensus and indeterminacy. These two case studies illustrate the different ways that texts play with the inherent contestation within sites of exemplarity to different ends. The third part of the chapter moves on to look at the Regulus 'site' more broadly and demonstrates the way that the controversies surrounding his site of exemplarity promote reflection of key ethical ideas and anxieties, such as loyalty, patriotism, courage, the treatment of prisoners, physical suffering, happiness, fortune, self-belief and perseverance. The chapter concludes by showing that this site is not alone in putting such ideas into play through its controversial features – this kind of stimulating controversy is a characteristic feature of Roman exempla, and is the key to facilitating ethical debate and reflection.

Finally, [Chapter 13](#), ‘Literary and Philosophical Adventures in the Exemplary Terrain’, takes a holistic view of a selection of these contested heterogeneous sites of exemplarity (taking as case studies those of Torquatus, Horatius, Fabius Maximus and Regulus again) across different literary treatments throughout Latin literature (or ‘remediations’). It further explores the literary strategies employed by ancient writers to maximise the ethical potential of these exemplary stories. These include, among other techniques, organisation of narrative structure, textual echoes, focalisation, dissenting voices, the dramatisation of different moral judgments and moral positions, as well as staged debates. It aims to show how individual authors engaged creatively with the wider *exempla* terrain, and the value for Latin scholars of appreciating this cultural context within which our authors were writing.

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Throughout the book, the arguments draw on close readings of ancient works of literature, often informed by comparative material or models from philosophy, education or folklore studies. Some chapters of this book are primarily devoted to sustained close readings of ancient literature ([Chapters 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 13](#) and [14](#)); others focus on the development of interpretative frameworks that underpin the analysis ([Chapters 2, 3, 8, 9](#) and [11](#)). My aim is to establish a robust foundation for future research in this area by delineating the parameters and key characteristics of Roman exemplary ethics. No single book could ever hope to exhaust the topic (in particular, I have said very little here about negative examples, and I have not addressed in detail issues of gender within exemplary structures), nor do justice to every corner of Roman exemplarity or every exemplary tale. Even within the chronological limits that I have imposed (roughly one hundred and fifty years to the end of the first century CE) the range of exemplary tales that one might discuss and of the relevant ancient texts in which we find them is vast. For the sake of clarity of argument, I have been very selective about what is included, using analysis of the ancient material to elucidate and support my arguments, rather than to provide comprehensive coverage of *exempla* and the texts in which they appear (were this even possible). The classical authors whose treatments of *exempla* are discussed in most detail here are Cicero, Livy, Valerius Maximus, Seneca the Younger and Silius Italicus. There are many other works of Latin literature which get scant attention here, but merit serious study (not least the poems of Propertius, Horace, Ovid and Virgil), as does the question of why so few representations of or allusions to Roman *exempla*

are to be found in Roman figurative art.²² My hope is that this book will provide a useful context and foundation for the further study of ancient exempla, and that the framework and approaches established here will prove valuable to other scholars in their study of exempla from other texts and periods. Since I hope this study will be of interest to non-classicists in relevant fields such as philosophy, literature, education, history, folklore studies and media studies, all the Latin and Greek in the book is translated, and I have endeavoured to provide an accessible introduction to each of the ancient authors, works of literature, and historical events that are discussed here.

In sum, the argument of this book is that Roman exemplary ethics from the first century BCE to the end of the first century CE facilitated the development of a distinctive way of seeing – exemplary wisdom – that allowed one to belong to the community while still retaining moral agency and individuality.²³ It is especially important to this conceptualisation of Roman exemplary ethics that this critical faculty is a key constituent. My account of Roman exemplary ethics demonstrates that it was a functional, coherent and nuanced ethics based on particular historical examples that, as a lived and pervasive cultural practice, may well also have played a formative role in the development of philosophical ideas in the Roman world, especially within Stoicism. Partly because it has been characterised by later thinkers (such as Montaigne) as doctrinaire, morally simplistic and monolithic, the sophistication, significance and influence of Roman exemplary ethics has never been sufficiently recognised.²⁴ This book is designed to remedy that situation.

²² Some useful preliminary reflections are found in Newby 2016, especially 3–4.

²³ See also Langlands 2015a for a preliminary outline of this argument, and how Roman exemplary ethics might relate to Aristotelian ethics and to the development of philosophical schools in Rome.

²⁴ Such characterisations are implicit in the way that post-Classical authors and the scholars who work on them contrast their approaches to exempla to what went before in antiquity. See e.g. Karlheinz Stierle implicitly contrasting Boccaccio's critique of exemplarity through the 'confrontation of exemplarity and contingency' with Valerius Maximus (Stierle 1998: 581–582); François Rigolot on imitation as 'duplication' before the development of a more nuanced approach in the Renaissance (Rigolot 1998: 559) or Lyons 1989: 238–239 summarising how seventeenth-century writers defined their own free agency and irony in opposition to the perceived uncritical positivity of earlier periods, and especially ancient Rome: 'The speaker and the main character of the texts of the seventeenth-century writers reach the extreme of retreat from the publically rhetorical situation in which example flourished in antiquity. They are themselves unconvinced by the positive inductive evidence around them. The rise of irony and the appearance of the reader as free agent removed from example not only its imitative or injunctive force but even its role as embodiment of truth. No longer part of a canon of exemplary passages or figures and broken off from practical rhetorical discipline, the literary example became an enigma and even an embarrassment to which criticism is only now beginning to respond.'

Roman Values and the Archetypal Exemplum

The stories that circulated as part of Roman exemplary ethics range from the legends of the early days of the republic, with Horatius Cocles holding the Sublician bridge to prevent the Etruscans swarming into Rome, to the inspiring exploits of military leaders, such as Scipio Africanus, Marcellus and Fabius Maximus during the Punic Wars, to loyal wives standing by their husbands in the troubled years of Civil War or Cato of Utica falling on his sword rather than submit to Caesarian rule. They include tales of divinely aided single combat, of the boldly transgressive murder of political agitators, of proud motherhood, of dignified poverty, of filial duty, of friendship that survives disaster, of cruel tyrants and of those who offer resistance to tyranny. Henry Wheatland Litchfield's chart of exemplary figures, drawn from a broad survey of Latin literature up to Claudian in the fourth century, includes as its main column headings the virtues of *virtus* (courage), *aequitas* (justice), *fides* (loyalty), *pietas* (sense of duty towards gods, fatherland, relations and others), *severitas* (strictness), *fortitudo* (bravery), *constantia* (perseverance), *continentia* (self-control), *paupertas* (poverty), *pudicitia* (sexual virtue), *clementia* (mercy), *moderatio* (moderation).¹ Valerius Maximus' *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, a collection of over a thousand moral exempla, is the most significant surviving piece of ancient literature to bear witness to the range of exemplary material circulated in this way. The categories into which this author organises his exemplary material range across the human experience, from justice and loyalty, courage and endurance, military and civil discipline, friendship, generosity, humanity, mercy and gratitude, *pietas*, family affection, sexual virtue, self-control, intelligence, prudence and cunning.²

¹ Litchfield 1914 includes a useful chart of exemplary figures and the virtues they exemplify at pages 28–35; a series of similar charts highlighting the chronological spread of exemplary tales in various Augustan and Tiberian literature is found in Dueck 2000.

² See Morgan 2007a: 129–159 for a 'Map of the Ethical Landscape' based primarily on the work of Valerius Maximus and his chapter headings and material (129–153) and with a briefer comparison to other works that contain exempla.

Not every morally edifying tale from ancient Rome is an exemplum, not every memorable historical episode is rendered into the exemplary form. This [first chapter](#) introduces the key features of an exemplum: typical content, usual literary form, the values associated with them and the way they convey within themselves ‘meta-exemplary’ guidelines about the use and interpretation of exempla. Through consideration of three well-known, representative exemplary tales – of Mucius, Curtius and Valerius Corvinus – it provides a preliminary sketch of the Roman exemplum at its simplest and most archetypal. This is the form of exemplum against which all subsequent and variant exempla are to be measured, and to whose primal status they respond. Plenty of Roman exempla do not follow this pattern, but their alternative pattern is always outlined with this paradigm in mind, in recognition of its primacy. This sketch, then, will serve as a starting point for a discussion that will then gradually broaden out to convey the scope of Roman exempla as a varied body of tales evolving over time.

Certain periods of Roman republican history are particularly rich in exempla: the period surrounding the expulsion of the kings and the early days of the Republic; the 370s BCE; the Second and Third Punic wars. Later the civil war period of the end of the republic provided a rich source of exempla in the second half of the first century CE. There are also well-known stories featuring exemplary women – from the earliest period, for instance, Cloelia and Lucretia, and the villainous Tullia; these bear a special relation to the foundational exemplum in the context of the highly gendered Roman ethics. However, an archetypal Roman exemplum would be a deed of legendary heroism set in the days of the early republic, with a Roman man displaying some form of military or civic excellence.³ Many such tales are related in the early books of Livy, their status as leading exempla in the first century CE is demonstrated by their taking pride of place at the head of Valerius Maximus’ chapters on the key Roman virtues: Horatius Coclès and Cornelius Cossus (3.2 on fortitude), Mucius Scaevola (3.3 on endurance), Publius Valerius Publicola (4.1 on moderation, 4.4 poverty), Manius Curius (4.3.5 on continence and abstinence) and Fabricius Luscinus (4.4.3 on poverty and 4.3.6 continence and abstinence), Brutus, Curtius and the Decii (5.6 patriotism). These early Republican figures continue to be mentioned and cited regularly in the classical centuries that follow.

³ The dynamic intersection of gender and exemplarity is discussed in Langlands 2004 and 2006.

For instance, one of the best-known legends of early Rome is that of Mucius 'Lefty' Scaevola, the Roman hero who tried and failed to kill the enemy king Porsenna, and then held his right hand unflinching in the fire until he had destroyed it. This archetypal tale is also one of the best known and enduring tales of the *exempla* tradition, cited or alluded to in a great range of ancient literary sources – epic, historiography, declamation, oratory, epigram – and from the popular sphere to the most rarefied.⁴ The grisly story is set in the 'legendary' period of early Roman history, shortly after the kings had been expelled from the city; this is a period for which we have no contemporary written evidence, and the stories that are told about this period often have a fabulous quality to them.⁵ Nevertheless, in the tradition of Roman *exempla*, the historical nature of the deeds that are handed down through the generations – the notion that they really happened, to a particular person at a particular time – is still vitally important, and the ancient Romans date this story precisely to the year 507 BCE. What follows is my own summary version of the story, drawing particularly on the accounts of Livy (2.12–13) and Plutarch (*Pop.* 17):

In the earliest days of the Roman Republic, shortly after the expulsion of the kings, in the era of legend, Rome came close to being destroyed. The city was being besieged by the army of the Etruscan king Porsenna, camped on the other side of the Tiber. The siege was harsh, and the Romans knew they could not last out much longer. They were at a loss to know what to do. Only one brave man in these desperate circumstances was able to come up with a plan. He made his proposal to the senate: he would swim across the Tiber, with a dagger hidden in his clothes, infiltrate, somehow, the enemy camp, find the king Porsenna, and assassinate him. The plan was fraught with dangers and almost impossible to accomplish, but it seemed the last hope for Rome. The senate agreed and he set off on his mission. The first part of his mission went as planned. He managed successfully to infiltrate the Etruscan encampment without being stopped. There he saw a man dressed in fine robes, and, assuming that he was Porsenna, he approached the man, drew out his dagger and stabbed him to death. But he had a mistake: this was not the king himself, but one of his henchmen. Mucius was captured and brought before the King, who announced that he would torture Mucius to find out the enemy's situation. Mucius is in a dire situation, on the

⁴ In addition to the more extended accounts found in Livy (2.12–13) and Plutarch (*Pop.* 17), there are also references at e.g. Cic. *Parad.* 1.11, *Sest.* 48, Val. Max. 3.3.1, Ps-Vergilian *Culex* 365–366, Manilius *Astr.* 4.30–34, Sen. *Contr.* 10.2.2, Sen. *Epp.* 24, 66, 98, *Ben.* 4.27.2, 7.15.2, *Prov.* 3.4, Sil. *Pun.* 8. 386–387, Martial *Epp.* 1.10, 8.30, 10.23, and Florus 1.4.4–6. Among the Greek authors we find versions of or references to the story in Cassius Dio 45.32.3, 46.19.8; 53.8.3; 63.13.2; Plutarch *Pop.* 17, *Par. Min.* 305d–306a; Dion. Hal. 5.25–29, 35. The diversity of the sources and their various representations and interpretations of Mucius' story will be explored in the following chapters.

⁵ On this body of tales from early Roman history, see Fox 1996, Wiseman 1995, Wiseman 1998.

point of being tortured and killed. More to the point, he has failed in his mission to kill Porsenna, and he knows that he represented the last hope of the Roman people and that all is lost without him. Even if he resists torture and hides the fact that Rome is close to surrender or death from starvation, he will not improve their lot. Yet he still has reserves of courage and ingenuity. Boldly confronting Porsenna he tells him proudly: "I am a Roman citizen. Do what you like with me, but I warn you that there are three hundred men just like me waiting back in Rome, and one by one we will send them out to kill you. You will never know when the next one is coming, and eventually one of us will manage to assassinate you." This is a lie, of course, but a strategic one. Then he says: "We Romans are tough, there is no point in trying to torture me." And to prove his point he holds his hand in the fire burning on the hearth where Porsenna is conducting his sacrifice, and keeps it there, unflinching, until it has burned away completely. At this display of physical courage and endurance Porsenna is overwhelmed, and he intervenes to pull Mucius away from the fire. And so impressed is he by Mucius' valour and the tale of many men like him back in Rome, that he decides that this is a city with which he would like to negotiate, and he goes on to draw up a treaty with Rome: the siege is lifted.

Mucius' bold though unsuccessful secret mission to kill Porsenna, and his refusal to crumble in the face of capture by the enemy, and above all, his defiant self-mutilation, add up to a truly heroic and extraordinary adventure, in which Mucius displays courage, patriotic loyalty, tactical prowess, exceptional powers of physical endurance, ability to keep cool and improvise in the heat of the moment, as well as tenacity of purpose. It is one thing to conceive and attempt the assassination of Porsenna, but to persevere and swiftly to develop new tactics after one has fallen into the enemies' hands is quite another. Even more poignantly, it is one thing to make that decision to burn one's hand as a signal of Roman endurance and resistance; to actually hold it in the flames, and to hold it there – defiantly and without yielding to the pain – until the hand is completely burned away, is a feat that almost defies comprehension and belief. This is a story that deserves to be told, that captures the imagination. As a complex and gripping narrative with twists and turns that tests its hero to the utmost, it possesses all the elements for the plot of a modern action film. For the ancient Romans, however, this story was more than just a good yarn. It was part of the foundation of Roman moral education, and Romans took the moral education of the young very seriously.⁶

⁶ For recent work on Roman moral education and its cultural role see Bernstein 2013, and on the role of exempla within moral education see Goldschmidt 2013, especially chapter 5; see also Walter 2004: 42–50. The moral aspects of education tend not to occupy the same central space in contemporary education theory and practice in the UK, and indeed there is a suspicion about 'moralistic'

Our earliest reference to the story may be a fragment from a history of Rome from the mid-second century BCE written by Lucius Cassius Hemina, cited in a speech of Cicero.⁷ Two hundred and fifty years later, in 91 CE, it seems that the story was staged in the arena as part of Domitian's opening spectacular for the new Colosseum, as entertainment for the masses, suggesting that in the Flavian era the story was iconic and expected to be instantly recognisable to the vast auditorium of spectators from all levels of society (and from all over the Roman empire).⁸ This provides an indication of the social range of exempla more generally, as well as the chronological range: these stories belonged to the population of Rome as a whole, not just to the narrowly defined educated elite and the leading families, and were shared across all levels of Roman society; yet at the same time, they were used in philosophical tracts as case studies for deliberation about philosophical issues (in Mucius' case, especially around the moral dimensions of pain and endurance).⁹ Perhaps directly as a result of Stoic uses of Mucius' story, it was also incorporated, along with other Roman exempla, into the early tradition surrounding Christian martyrdom, as a parallel, or contrast to, or precedent for, Christian tales.¹⁰

The range of different sources in which this story of Mucius Scaevola makes an appearance will render it a useful focus throughout this book for extended discussion of the central features of Roman exemplary ethics. A sustained focus on this exemplum across a number of chapters will enable us to see how a single story is cast in many different forms across the sources, signifies many different things in different contexts, and is used to think about a variety of different issues – all the time retaining its nature as an exemplum. In this chapter, however, we begin by examining Mucius as an archetypal exemplary hero, whose inspirational tale is associated with the core virtues of endurance, courage and patriotism.¹¹ Alongside the exemplum of Mucius, this chapter will focus on two further exempla –

education; one research group currently trying to counter this is the Jubilee Centre based in Birmingham which researches character education and attempting to reintroduce moral education into schools in the UK.

⁷ Cornell 2013, F20; Peter 1906 F 16.

⁸ Martial *Epp.* 1.10, 8.30, 10.23, with Coleman 1990: 60–61 on this spectacle as one of the 'fatal charades', Fitzgerald 2007: 59–66 and Feldherr 2010: 176.

⁹ Along with figures such as Regulus, Fabricius and later Cato the Younger. See Cic. *Parad.* 2 and especially Sen. *Epp.* 24, 66, 98, *Ben.* 4.27.2, 7.15.2, *Prov.* 3.4 with Inwood 2007: 179–180, Edwards 2007: 87–90, 94; Edwards 1999.

¹⁰ Tert. *Mart.* 4, *Apol.* 50, *De anima* 58, August. *Civ. Dei.* 4.20, 5.14, Minucius Felix 37 with Carlson 1948.

¹¹ In the following chapter, we will see that it also illustrates and explores less virtuous, more competence-related ethical qualities such as trickery and resourcefulness.

the heroic tales of Valerius Corvinus (dated to 349 BCE) and Marcus Curtius (369 BCE). The passages in which these latter stories are narrated (taken from the works of Livy, Valerius Maximus and Aulus Gellius) also serve to illustrate the typical literary form taken by the exemplum in ancient literature, and provide a useful introduction to some common textual features of exempla (narrative simplicity and concision, typical length and structure, and the importance of the interpretative frame), and typical content (the very specific dates and locations attributed to the heroic deeds, the attention that is drawn to the process of commemoration through which the stories have been handed down, the presence of iconic visual details and the recurrent role of an internal audience who models response to the deed). Having established these common formal characteristics of the archetypal exemplum, the chapter will go on to outline the central elements of an exemplum that together generate its ethical value (the hero, the story and the moral), explore how these three exemplary tales key into the range of moral values that lie at the heart of Roman exemplary ethics, and examine some inherent tensions, in particular, the relationship between the exceptional and the normative, the individual and the community.

Mucius' story is that of a brave man who volunteers for a dangerous lone mission against the enemy to save his city, and who wins his family the honorific title 'Scaevola' in recognition of the sacrifice of his hand. Similarly the tale of Valerius 'Corvinus' is the story of how in 349 BCE a bold volunteer for single combat against a menacing Gaul won his family the honorific title 'Raven-man' (or 'Raven', Corvus) because of the divine aid given to him by a raven.¹² One of the fullest accounts of this latter tale is that offered by Livy (7.26), but further on I relate verbatim the account given by Aulus Gellius in the second century CE, since Gellius' version nicely conveys a sense of the length, form, structure, tone and relative narrative simplicity of a typical literary exemplum.¹³ Gellius' account is also typical in explicitly locating the story within the framework of Roman cultural memory and commemorative practices. Commemorating the episode five hundred years after it is supposed to have taken place, Gellius draws attention to its status as a centuries-old traditional tale, recorded in the annals of ancient Rome and handed down through

¹² Livy usually calls him 'Corvus', except in two places later in the work where he is called 'Corvinus' (32.15, 40.3); see Oakley 1998: 239 for the implications of this, which may be a tribute to Livy's contemporary Messala Corvinus.

¹³ In addition to the aforementioned texts, the story is referred to at Varro *LL* 6.148–150; Livy 7.6.1–6; Ovid *Fast.* 1.602; Dion. Hal. 14.11.201–203; Sil. *Pun.* 5.78–80; Florus 1.18; Dio Cass. fr. 30.2.

historical tradition. He frames his narrative by opening and closing with explicit references to the media by which it has been transmitted down the centuries. These include: the leading literary works of Roman history; the visual monuments of the city of Rome; and the commemoration of the tale in the *cognomen* of the Valerii Corvini family. All these details of the story's preservation in media that can be accessed in Gellius' own day serve to emphasise the idea that this story has been handed down through an unbroken chain of transmission from the fourth century BCE.¹⁴

Aulus Gellius introduces the story by emphasising the consensus surrounding the story's content and significance:¹⁵ 'Of the story of Valerius Maximus, who was called "Corvinus" (Raven-man) on account of the help and defence given to him by a raven, there is hardly a single one of the most highly regarded historians who has given a variant version' (*de Maximo Valerio, qui Corvinus appellatus est ob auxilium propugnationemque corvi alitis, haut quisquam est nobilium scriptorum, qui secus dixerit*, Gell. NA 9.II.I). He goes on:

This truly awe-inspiring event is commemorated in the books of the annals. In the consulship of Lucius Furius and Appius Claudius, a young man from the Valerii Maximi family was appointed tribune of the soldiers. And at that time the mighty forces of the Gauls had settled in the Pomptine district, and the consuls, worried by the strength and number of the enemy, were drawing up the army in formation. Meanwhile the leader of the Gauls, a man of vast and towering height, his weapons shining with gold, advancing with huge strides, brandishing his weapon, came forward and looked around him with contempt and arrogance, despising all that he saw, and demanded that, if there was anyone in the Roman army who dared to fight with him, he should step forward and meet him. Then the tribune Valerius, while the rest of them were hesitating between fear and shame, (first obtaining permission from the consuls to fight this monstrously arrogant Gaul) stepped forward to meet him, fearlessly yet modestly. They meet, they stand facing one another, they are already engaged in combat, and there and then some sort of divine power appeared: a raven suddenly out of nowhere flies down and settles on the tribune's helmet, and from there begins to attack the face and eyes of his opponent. It was flying at the Gaul and pestering him and tearing at his hand with its claws, and obscuring his vision with its wings, and when it had had enough of savagery it flew back to the tribune's helmet. And so the tribune, with both armies watching, both relying on his own courage and defended by the bird's help, defeated the ferocious enemy leader, and killed him, and for this reason acquired the

¹⁴ On the significance of the idea of the 'unbroken chain of transmission', see [Chapter 9](#).

¹⁵ For more on the role of consensus, see [Chapter 6](#).

name 'Corvinus' (Raven-man). This happened four hundred and five years after the founding of Rome. The divine Augustus took care that a statue of this Corvinus should be set up in his forum. On the head of this statue, the figure of a raven is a commemoration of the event and the fight that I have just related.

ea res prorsus admiranda sic profecto est in libris annalibus memorata: adulescens tali genere editus L. Furio Claudio Appio consulibus fit tribunus militaris. atque in eo tempore copiae Gallorum ingentes agrum Pomptinum insederant, instruebanturque acies a consulibus de vi ac multitudine hostium satis agentibus. dux interea Gallorum vasta et ardua proceritate armisque auro praefulgentibus grandia ingrediens et manu telum reciprocans incedebat perque contemptum et superbiam circumspiciens despiciensque omnia venire iubet et congregi, si quis pugnare secum ex omni Romano exercitu auderet. tum Valerius tribunus ceteris inter metum pudoremque ambiguis impetrato prius a consulibus ut in Gallum tam inmaniter adrogantem pugnare sese permetterent, progreditur intrepide modesteque obviam; et congregiuntur et consistunt, et conserebantur iam manus, atque ibi vis quaedam divina fit: corvus repente inprovisus advolat et super galeam tribuni insistit atque inde in adversari os atque oculos pugnare incipit; insilibat, obturbabat et unguibus manum laniabat et prospectum alis arcebat atque, ubi satis saevierat, revolabat in galeam tribuni. sic tribunus spectante utroque exercitu et sua virtute nixus et opera alitis propugnatus ducem hostium ferocissimum vicit interfecitque atque ob hanc causam cognomen habuit Corvinus. id factum est annis quadringentis quinque post Romam conditam. statuam Corvino isti divus Augustus in foro suo statuendam curavit. in eius statuæ capite corvi simulacrum est rei pugnaeque, quam diximus, monimentum.

Once a fresh act of heroism playing out in the Pomptine fields, this hand-to-hand fight is now, in Gellius' day, a constitutive element of Roman history, explaining various phenomena: a statue in the Augustan Forum (inaugurated in 2 BCE), a family name, ancient Roman victory over the Gauls, and Roman pre-eminence in Italy. It is not clear whether Gellius is citing a particular canonical version of this story; his own introduction to the story conveys the sense that this version is synthesised from a general tradition rather than drawing from one particular textual source.¹⁶ Here Gellius mentions multiple *scriptores nobiles* ('noble writers') and gives the impression that his is a new version generated out of the existing tradition of written history, based in the preeminent commemorative form of script

¹⁶ This is in contrast to the case of Manlius 'Torquatus' and his duel with another Gaulish warrior, mentioned in the Introduction, where Gellius claims to be citing the precise words of the first century BCE annalist Quadrigarius (Gell. *NA* 9.13).

literature, yet also existing separately from the written record, as his references to the non-literary media of commemoration remind us; everyone knows this well-attested tale. Gellius makes beautifully clear in his presentation of this exemplary story the way exempla are recorded in many different media that are in dialogue with one another.¹⁷ The passage also highlights the significant role that annals (as official state records) and high literature play in providing authority for these sites.¹⁸

As is conventional for exempla, this exemplum is presented as a historical episode that has been recast as a morality tale, with the named heroic figure and his exploits drawn from, or at least located in, the wider historical tradition. The narrative is concise, so that it can be ingested more or less in one bite, and no extraneous details of context or description intrude on the spare and tense central narrative of the two men's encounter. Certain details, however, are not considered extraneous: precise date and location of the encounter are carefully pinpointed, and the hero's name is given, resonant with its connections to prominent contemporary Roman families. Such precision of these details is typical of the representation of exempla in literary form.¹⁹ This episode is very specifically dated to 349 BCE, and this date is communicated twice in the passage, first right at the beginning as a consular date ('In the consulship of Lucius Furius and Appius Claudius'), and then towards the end of the tale, as a date calculated from the founding of the city: *id factum est annis quadrigentis quinque post Romam conditam*. The location of the duel is specified as the Pomptine Fields, important agricultural lands on the coast southeast of Rome. The family name of the hero is given here as Valerius Maximus.

This little episode, so nicely positioned here in Roman space and time, also contains, like most Roman exemplary tales, a visually evocative and memorable feature that can be preserved in tradition both textually and visually as an aide-memoire; in this case it is the raven that takes on this role, evoked by the very cognomen of the hero.²⁰ This freeze-frame moment is emphasised in Gellius' account by the sudden shift to the present tense, which marks the moment when the raven alights on the tribune's helmet (*corvus repente inprovisus advolat*). This vivid motif has, as

¹⁷ On the way these work together over time to generate a 'site of exemplarity', see [Chapter 8](#).

¹⁸ On the important role of monuments and material culture for the transmission of exemplary stories, see Hölkeskamp 1996: 305–308; Walter 2004; Roller 2004; Blom 2010: 15, listing for instance coins, buildings and monuments, as well as rituals such as funeral processions.

¹⁹ Although, as well shall see, these specific places and times and names can often alter dramatically between different versions; for more on the significance of the surprising fluidity of these key details, see [Chapters 9 and 10](#).

²⁰ On the memorable visual element as a key feature of Roman exemplary tales, see Roller 2004.

the passage relays, subsequently been incorporated into a famous monument to the story, *statuam Corvino isti divus Augustus in foro suo statuendam curavit. in eius statuæ capite corvi simulacrum est rei pugnaeque, quam diximus, monimentum* ('The divine Augustus took care that a statue of this Corvinus should be set up in his forum. On the head of this statue the figure of a raven is a commemoration of the event and the fight that I have just related,' Gell. *NA* 9.11.10).²¹ The story also contains, as many exemplary tales do, a specified internal audience who watch and admire the deed, and whose admiration is implicitly understood to be the basis of the deed's commemoration. Such an audience both models the desired response of later readers and audiences of the tale, and also conveys the logic of the tale's commemoration by providing the original witnesses to the deed. Here the spectators who stand around to watch are described with the phrase *spectante utroque exercitu* ('with both armies watching'), and this motif of spectators on either side is a common element of exemplary deeds, where both friend and foe appreciate the heroism in their different ways.²²

My next archetypal exemplum is that of Marcus Curtius' plunge into the chasm. A colourful account of the episode is provided by Livy at the end of the first century BCE as part of his narrative account of early Roman history, while in Valerius Maximus, writing in the 30s CE, we find a more compact version – as is characteristic of each author. The two versions are, however, of a roughly similar length and weight, and, as we shall see, both passages share features with the Corvinus story as it is relayed by Gellius, further illustrating the shared formal characteristics of Roman exempla as they appear in Latin literature. The following analysis will also convey the ethical values with which such exempla are typically associated and the ethical issues and tensions that they typically raise.

Livy introduces the episode with the phrase 'in that year' (*eo anno*), again situating the story precisely within his chronological account of the early Roman republic. The year is 362:

In that same year, whether because of an earthquake or some other force, the middle of the forum collapsed to a huge depth with an enormous chasm. And this chasm could not be filled by earth, which everybody brought, until, at the warning of the gods, they began to ask what it was that was the greatest source of strength for the Roman people, for the soothsayers announced that

²¹ See also Livy 7.26.1–10; Dion. Hal. 15.1.1–4; Zon. 7.25.

²² Cf. Tac. *Hist.* 2.35 where the armies of Vitellius and Otho respond very differently to the prowess of the German fighters; see Chaplin 2000: 50–72, Roller 2004 and Pasco-Pranger 2015: 304 on spectators and their judgment as part of the process of generating exempla; cf. Leigh 1997 on spectacle and exemplum in Lucan, Feldherr 1998 on spectacle and exemplum in Livy.

they must offer this up as a sacrifice to this place, if they wished the Roman state to last forever. Then they say that M. Curtius, an outstanding young warrior, rebuked them as they stood wondering whether there was anything that was a greater Roman good than weapons and courage, and when silence fell, looking upon the temples of the immortal gods that rose above the forum, and stretching his hands now to the skies and now to the chasm that lay gaping in the earth and the gods of the underworld, vowed to sacrifice himself (*se devovisse*). Then, mounting a horse that was decked out as lavishly as possible, he plunged himself fully armed into the chasm, and offerings and grain were thrown in on top of him by a crowd of men and women, and the Lacus Curtius was not named for that ancient soldier Curtius Mettius under T. Tatius, but on account of this man. There would be plenty of people willing to put the effort in, if there were any way of finding out the truth; now this must be established through the oral tradition, since antiquity will not allow us any certainty; and the name of the lake is more well-known in relation to this more recent story.

eodem anno, seu motu terrae seu qua vi alia, forum medium ferme specu vasto conlapsum in immensam altitudinem dicitur; neque eam voraginem coniectu terrae, cum pro se quisque gereret, expleri potuisse, priusquam deum monitu quaeri coeptum quo plurimum populus Romanus posset; id enim illi loco dicandum vates canebant, si rem publicam Romanam perpetuam esse vellent. tum M. Curtium, iuvenem bello egregium, castigasse ferunt dubitantes an ullum magis Romanum bonum quam arma virtusque esset, et silentio facto templa deorum immortalium, quae foro imminet, Capitoliumque intuentem et manus nunc in caelum, nunc in patentes terrae hiatus ad deos manes porrigentem, se devovisse; equo deinde quam poterat maxime exornato insidentem, armatum se in specum immisisse; donaque ac fruges super eum a multitudine virorum ac mulierum congestas lacumque Curtium non ab antiquo illo T. Tati milite Curtio Mettio sed ab hoc appellatum. cura non deesset, si qua ad verum via inquirentem ferret: nunc fama rerum standum est, ubi certam derogat vetustas fidem; et lacus nomen ab hac recentiore insignitius fabula est (7.6.1–6).

As in the case of Corvinus, this exemplary story is offered as the aetiology for a particular monument, in this case the Lacus Curtius, a location in the centre of the Forum Romanum. Even in the twenty-first century, this spot in the forum is still marked by the reproduction of a marble relief (the original is now in the Capitoline museum) thought to date from the republican period, depicting an armoured man on horseback stumbling over swampy ground.²³ However, it is not clear either to Livy and other ancient writers, or to modern scholars, that it is indeed this story of Curtius

²³ On the Curtius frieze, see Coarelli 2007: 70–71; Coarelli dates the relief from the republican period and argues that its inscription was added subsequently; Wardle argues that the frieze was

to which the name of the Lacus Curtius and the accompanying relief refer; there are other candidates for the explanation.²⁴ Livy acknowledges at the end of his account that the origins of the name are in dispute, and that there is no way of knowing for sure the real story of how this location got its name. He is clear that this is a story that is told, circulated orally, rather than documented, and he refers to the tale as a *fabula* (tale) that derives from *fama* (oral tradition), concluding: *ab hac recentiore insignitius fabula est*, ‘the name of the lake is better known from this more recent tale.’ Livy’s account is very specific about time and place (‘in the middle of the forum’, *forum medium ferme*) and yet he acknowledges that the story is completely unverifiable. This apparent paradox of the juxtaposition of certainty and uncertainty is a prominent feature of the exempla tradition. As we will see in subsequent chapters, both the consensus surrounding the stories and their moral value, and the uncertainty about their specific meaning and key details, play important roles in facilitating their function as an ethical resource and their transmission in Roman cultural memory.

*

Valerius Maximus includes his account of Curtius’ leap as the second in a list of thirteen exemplary tales that fall under the rubric of *pietas erga patriam* (‘loyalty to one’s country’):

When a huge chasm suddenly opened up in the ground right in the middle of the forum, and the soothsayer’s response was that it could only be filled by whatever was the most valuable asset of the Roman people, Curtius, a young man of the most noble spirit and birth interpreted this to mean²⁵ that our city excelled in courage and in fighting, and so he mounted his horse, all decked out with his military insignia, and galloping determinedly towards the chasm he rode himself headlong into its depths, and after him the entire citizen community competed to throw in grain in his honour and the earth recovered its former state. From that time great honours shone out in the Roman forum, and to this day no exemplum of patriotism has come to mind more illustrious than that of Curtius.

reincorporated into the restorations to the pavement in the forum after the fire of 7 BCE (Wardle 2014: 387–388).

²⁴ One alternative is the story of Mettius Curtius, the soldier who rode his horse into the swamp. See Varro *LL* 5.148–150 on the various explanations for how the *lacus Curtius* got its name. Cf. Dion. Hal. 14.11.201–203; Dio Cass. fr. 30.2. There is occasionally confusion in modern scholarship, where scholars (e.g. Newlands 2002) use the name Mettius but seem to be referring to our Curtius here and his chasm leap.

²⁵ Note that here Valerius imputes a specific motivation to Curtius; on the significance of this technique, see the discussion of Val. Max. 3.3 in Chapter 7.

cum autem in media parte fori vasto ac repentino hiatu terra subsideret responsumque esset ea re illum tantum modo conpleri posse, qua populus Romanus plurimum valeret, Curtius et animi et generis nobilissimi adulescens interpretatus urbem nostram virtute armisque praecipue excellere, militaribus insignibus ornatus equum conscendit eumque vehementer admotis calcaribus praecipitem in illud profundum egit, super quem universi cives honoris gratia certatim fruges iniecerunt, continuoque terra pristinum habitum recuperavit. magna postea decora in foro Romano fulserunt, nullum tamen hodieque pietate Curtii erga patriam clarius obversatur exemplum, (Val. Max. 5.6.2).

A comparison of this passage from Valerius Maximus with the story of Valerius Corvinus in Aulus Gellius cited earlier reveals some of the formal features of the exemplum as a literary trope; these are also related to its role as a literary device within rhetoric, where an exemplum is related or mentioned to illustrate or support an argument, and its significance needs therefore to be immediately clear. The narrative constitutes the most important aspect of the exemplum, but it is succinctly conveyed, and the reader's interpretation of the story's moral significance is heavily directed by the commentary within which the historical material is framed. Valerius Maximus is a master of this pointed narrative concision, with stylistically distinctive prose that boils down a narrative into a single complex sentence while bringing out its moral significance.²⁶ Compare the sequencing of sentences and temporal sequence with those of Gellius' more linear account: where Gellius narrates his episode in simple sequence, Valerius tells the whole story within a single grammatical period, with the grammatical connection deftly linking together in straightforward implications about cause and effect. At the centre of the sentence is the grammatical subject, the named hero Curtius. The scene is set with the opening *cum* clauses (*cum ... terra subsideret, responsumque esset*), and then the hero appears onstage to correctly interpret the situation and act accordingly: (*Curtius ... interpretatus ... conscendit ... egit*), and then finally the story is sealed off by the celebratory response of the whole community of Rome throwing in grain after him and the healing of the ruptured earth over his head (*super quem*). Such narrative compactness relies on prior external knowledge of the story that the reader brings to bear upon reading the text, and incorporates as an important

²⁶ Valerius is drawing on same canonical tradition but making the story his own by reworking it in his own way; this creative response is a feature of Latin literature's engagement with exempla that we will explore in [Chapters 12](#) and [13](#). It corresponds to an extent to the model of *smontaggio* and *rimontaggio* proposed by Guerrini 1981, and also the idea of remediation of memory sites in cultural memory, discussed in [Chapter 8](#). There is an inherent tension in this process between the idea of transmitting an unbroken tradition and constantly remaking the story, as we shall see.

element the moral steer that directs the reader's interpretation of the narrative content.

In Valerius' account we take a breath only once the story is over, when we move to the second, shorter sentence appended to the narrative, where Valerius draws attention to and reiterates the significance and message of the story. This last reflective sentence represents another formal element of the textual exemplum: the more or less explicit interpretative frame within which the story is to be interpreted. As Roberto Guerrini has argued, the narrative material only acquires exemplary meaning with the presence of an interpretative frame, usually in the form of a brief introduction and conclusion to the story, and sometimes with embedded reflection.²⁷

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Taking these three stories as our basis, let us now turn to that exemplary meaning, and examine how it is established in these archetypal exempla, and what its moral characteristics are. As we will see, as well as their association with core Roman virtues and moral values, these exempla also betray inherent ethical tensions, particularly relating to the relationship between the individual and the wider community. We shall see that these can be seen as 'meta-exemplary' ideas – ideas about how exempla should be read and used. To begin with, however, we can identify three core elements of an exemplum that form the basis of the multi-stage process of moral learning that will be fully explored in [Chapter 4](#). These elements can be summarised as the hero, the story and the moral.

I The Hero

An exemplum needs a hero. This is not quite true (some exempla have villains, some morally dubious characters, such as Alexander the Great or Sulla, and others have as their protagonist groups, such as the Roman senate, or Spartan women). However, it is true that an exemplum needs a central person (or persons) and such persons must be *morally charged* (i.e. more than merely a protagonist). Often, as in the cases of Corvinus, Curtius and Mucius, this person will indeed be a hero plain and simple, characterised as admirable and exceptional in himself, and endowed with all kinds of moral and other qualities. Our ancient texts characterise these men as brave, patriotic, decisive and as

²⁷ See Guerrini 1981 on the formal ABC structure of exempla in Valerius Maximus and elsewhere, where 'B' is the material, framed with introduction (A) and conclusion (C); cf. Gazich 1995, [chapter 2](#) on the typology of exempla.

outstanding warriors, with tremendous powers of physical endurance. What is important is that the person at the heart of the exemplum is characterised in *some* way, whether as virtuous, villainous, ordinary or complex. This characterisation is an important aspect of exemplarity in a culture where virtue ethics was in operation, so that the kind of person involved bears close relation to the nature of a deed performed. (Indeed, the exemplary person can be fully identified with the exemplum, as in the sentence: ‘Mucius Scaevola is a famous Roman exemplum.’) The person (as opposed to their deed or the virtue in the abstract) can be the focus of the exemplarity for the moral learner, providing in himself or herself both an aspirational model for the learner and a template for virtue, somewhat along the lines of what is today called ‘role-modeling’, and is theorised in modern psychology, social and educational theory as an important educational process.²⁸ A person as an embodiment of virtue or of some other quality is a powerful educational tool, who provides a comparandum for the learner. The vast majority of exemplary persons are famous figures from history, whose name is enough to evoke the salient story or series of stories associated with that person.²⁹ It is significant that this means that they are both real people and specific individuals: both features – realness and individuality – enhance and shape their exemplary potential. Their ‘realness’ means that they can work by setting a precedent and can tap into all that is implied by this in terms of achievability and reassurance. Their individuality and the fact that they were carrying out their deeds in specific and identifiable historical contexts enriches the process by which a learner compares himself or herself to the exemplary figure and tailors moral messages and ideals to his or her own behaviour accordingly.³⁰ The presence of this morally charged person sets the exemplum apart from many other kinds of moral tales, which may have, by contrast, an ‘everyman’ protagonist, perhaps

²⁸ See further [Chapter 4](#). On role-modeling in contemporary societies, see e.g. Sheridan 1968, Moberg 2000, Petersen et al. 2010, Gayer and Therwath 2010, Amaya 2013, Morgenroth, Ryan and Peters 2015.

²⁹ There are exempla that have unnamed protagonists, or where the protagonists are groups or communities, and both these are important, too, in different ways. The importance of unnamed exempla often lies in the idea of inclusivity or the different commemoration practices that are available to those who do not belong to aristocratic families.

³⁰ The implications of individuality will be explored in [Chapter 5](#), in the context of the need for sensitivity to individual circumstances as an important principle built into Roman exemplary ethics. The individuality of exempla is also, of course, a tension in exemplarity, working against their iterative function.

an animal (if a fable), an allegorical feel, and be set in a universal present.³¹

2 The Story

Another powerful pedagogic element of the exemplum is of course the narrative itself.³² (As with the hero, the exemplum is often fully identified with its narrative; indeed, exempla are most often described primarily *as* narratives, as in a sentence such as, ‘The story of Mucius Scaevola is one of the most widely-cited Roman exempla.’) Stories can be a compelling means of moral communication, which engage readers and listeners on a particularly deep level that is not necessarily reached through non-narrative means, as we shall see in the following chapter. The core element of narrative is something that sets the Roman exemplum apart from the modern role model or the moral exemplar.³³ Narrative has the potential to convey cause and effect, the reasons for decisions, and the consequences of actions. An exemplary narrative tends, in particular, to hold at its heart the dramatisation of moral challenges and moral decisions.³⁴ Corvinus steps forward to respond to the terrifying challenge of the Gaul; Curtius takes it upon himself to interpret a bewildering situation and to make a critical decision that saves Rome from destruction. The plot of the Mucius story is fairly complex and includes several such moments where Mucius faces challenges of an extreme nature and must make a decision about how to act, devising ways of overcoming these challenges. His first challenge is the siege of Rome and the crisis whereby his city finds itself on the brink of defeat through starvation; here he devises the plan to assassinate Porsenna. His next challenge comes when he discovers that he has killed the wrong man and now finds himself in the power of his enemy. In the face of this new challenge he once again makes a series of decisions about what to do,

³¹ On differences between Roman exempla and other story traditions, see [Chapter 2](#).

³² In ancient texts, exempla are often defined in terms of the narrative content; in the ancient rhetorical handbooks, they are described as *res gestae* (‘things that have been done’, ‘past actions’), which incorporates a narrative sense but places the emphasis on the content described rather than on the act of telling.

³³ Ancient texts do also make reference to another form of exemplum as living individual, where the focus is entirely on the person and there are no particular stories associated with him or her. This is the case, for instance, in two passages that are often cited as evidence for Roman aristocratic education, Ter. *Ad.* 414–419, Hor. *Sat.* 1.4.105–121 (cf. Chaplin 2000: 11–13), but it seems to become more prominent in the first century: Augustus’ use of his family, and of the exemplary figures described in Pliny’s letters (see Langlands 2014 and 2015b); see [Chapter 11](#).

³⁴ Cf. Stierle 1970 on the idea that an exemplum depicts an obstacle overcome; Gelley (ed.) 1995, [chapter 7](#); Lyons 1989; cf. [Chapter 12](#) where this idea is developed in the context of Roman literature.

culminating in the decision to make use of the nearby sacrificial hearth in order to burn off his own hand. Each of these decisions sees Mucius drawing on and enacting particular virtues and strengths, which are thus demonstrated and made vivid through his subsequent actions, allowing his exemplum to play a deictic role.

3 The Moral

The third element that goes to make up an exemplum is the moral. ‘The moral’ can of course, in English, be used to describe specifically the moral lesson that is imparted by, for instance, a fable. Sometimes, as with fables, such a ‘moral’ will be explicitly articulated within the text itself; often Valerius Maximus will draw a moral conclusion after narrating an exemplary tale.³⁵ However, as Elizabeth Allen has pointed out in her analysis of medieval exemplary tales, often a stated and explicit moral of this kind is far from the only moral message that a story imparts.³⁶ Indeed, the beauty of the narrative form is that it is able to convey so much more than a simply asserted moral message of this kind, as we shall see in the [next chapter](#). However, even if the moral element may not be so simple as to constitute nothing more than ‘the moral of the story’, nevertheless, in order to count as exemplary, such stories also need to be charged with ethical ideals of one sort or another. An exemplum must, one way or another, make reference to an external moral framework or to moral ideals or ideas that can be extracted from or exist outside of the narrative.³⁷ Indeed, without the element of moral idealism a story that looks in formal terms like an exemplum will in fact be a different kind of story.³⁸

This point can be illustrated by consideration of the real-life case of Aron Ralston from 2003, whose extraordinary act of physical courage, mental and physical endurance and stamina, comparable to that of Mucius, has been immortalised in his autobiography (*Between a Rock and a Hard Place*) and in a 2010 film, *127 Hours*, directed by Danny Boyle. Alone in the Utah desert, pinned under a huge boulder that was lying on his arm, Ralston managed slowly and painfully to carve away at his own forearm with a

³⁵ On Valerius’ use of moralising conclusions, see Guerrini 1981, [Chapter 2](#).

³⁶ Allen 2005. Cf. the discussion of fables in [Chapter 2](#).

³⁷ Cf. Kristjansson 2006 on Aristotle’s theory of emulation. There, virtue’s existence as an abstract independent from and external to specific instances of virtue is what enables the vital quality of ‘iterativity’ – what is excellent about the exemplary act must be able to be reproduced outside the exemplum itself, cf. Lyons 1989: 26–28.

³⁸ See the discussion of Martial *Ep.* 10.25 and Val. Max. 3.3 in [Chapter 7](#), where we see what happens when moral idealism is taken out of Mucius’ story.

blunt penknife, breaking the bones in his arm using a tourniquet and then persevering until he had severed his forearm entirely and was free (he then had to abseil one-handed down a 65-foot sheer cliff-face and hike for miles in the midday sun). It is an act that almost defies belief, and evokes similar feelings of revulsion and horror to the story of Mucius, especially if one dwells on the details of the hand mutilation in both cases – more so perhaps because of the enhanced reality for us as modern readers of its being performed by a living individual in our contemporary modern world. In both cases a man inflicts horrific pain and mutilation upon himself, in order to obtain something that he values highly enough to make this sacrifice worthwhile. In Mucius' case, this is the survival and freedom of Rome; in Ralston's case, this is his own survival and freedom from the rock pinning him down. Ralston's is an exciting story, and it invites admiration. It may stimulate one to compare oneself to its protagonist, and wonder whether one would be able to do the same if one found oneself in similar circumstances. It may even inspire a desire to toughen oneself up so as to be prepared to meet similar challenges. (Indeed, as a result of this experience Ralston nowadays makes money as a motivational speaker). However, Ralston severed his own arm for his own sake, to save his own life, and so, admirable as his action is, it fails to meet the requirements of a Roman moral exemplum in the traditional mould, where the primary commitment must be to the wider community. On the other hand, if Ralston's self-mutilation is presented as an act done for others then it comes closer to having a moral edge, as Ralston suggests in his autobiography. In some of his philosophical musings inspired by the experience he also emphasises the value of putting oneself to the test: 'How would I behave in a situation that caused me to summon the essence of my character? The tragedy inspired me to test myself. I wanted to reveal to myself who I was: the kind of person who died, or the kind of person who overcame circumstances to help himself and others,' (Ralston 2011: 74, often cited elsewhere as an inspirational quotation.) The boundary between what counts as ethical and what does not is hard to define; disposition and intention are also important factors in determining morality.³⁹

In Roman exemplary ethics, what makes a story exemplary is that there is something more at stake in it than the welfare of the individual involved.⁴⁰

³⁹ See Chapter 7.

⁴⁰ One might compare the Herodotean story of Hegistratus of Elis (Hdt. 9.37), who hacked off his own foot in order to escape captivity in Sparta (amazing, impressive, but not moral) with the Roman story of Marcus Sergius told at Pliny *NH* 7.104–106 who, despite losing his right hand in battle continued his successful career as a soldier with an iron prosthetic (patriotic hero); see Beagon 2002

The safety, survival, and indeed dominance over others of the Roman state is one of the most important manifestations of the greater good, and thus patriotism is prominent among exemplary virtues, along with *pietas* and loyalty, virtues which bind one into the wider community. The exemplary figure of Mucius is associated with many of the key Roman virtues: he displays loyalty to his country and the capacity to put its needs above his own and sacrifice his own safety, but also admirable bravery, and extraordinary powers of mental and physical endurance and perseverance. All these, corresponding to the Latin concepts of *pietas erga patriam*, *fortitudo*, *patientia* and *constantia*, are core Roman ethical qualities.⁴¹ Typically, in the course of the plot, a Roman exemplary hero and his deed manifest not one single virtue, but a cluster of virtues working in conjunction with one another, within the overarching motivational framework of patriotism. The element of self-sacrifice for a greater good that is found in all three stories is typical of Roman exemplary plots.⁴² Very often the hero is faced with making a choice where he will ultimately be required to sacrifice something that is very valuable to him for the sake of something else that he decides should be valued even more highly. Often this decision will lead to the sacrifice of himself and his own life for the sake of others. In the case of Mucius the sacrifice is of his own physical wellbeing and of his right hand, which is such an important part of his body, especially for a warrior. This sacrifice is made for the sake of Rome and the security of the city and her people.

What is valued above all, in this Roman story-world, is the community, and the individual is subordinated to its needs. A quality which we would describe as ‘patriotism’, described in Latin with the phrase *pietas erga patriam* (‘a sense of duty towards the fatherland’),⁴³ is the foundational virtue that underpins and is served by other virtues, such as courage,

who makes the connection with Mucius, and discusses both stories in the context of the theme of *fortunae victor*, a theme whose significance will be elaborated in [Chapter 13](#) in relation to the exempla of Atilius Regulus and the slave of Tagus.

⁴¹ For an ancient summary of core Roman moral qualities, see e.g. Cic. *Inv.* 2.52.159–163: *virtus*, *prudentia* (consisting of *memoria*, *intelligentia* and *providentia*); *iustitia* (consisting of *religio*, *pietas*, *gratia*, *vindicatio*, *observantia* and *veritas*), *fortitudo* (consisting of *magnificentia*, *fidentia*, *patientia* and *perseverantia*); *temperantia* (consisting of *continentia*, *clementia* and *modestia*). Later in the first century, other qualities such as family loyalty and friendship come to the fore; see e.g. Méthy 2003 and Langlands 2014 on the humanisation of virtue in Pliny the Younger, Lucarelli 2007 on the emphasis on personal and familial connections in Valerius Maximus in response to social destruction wrought by the civil war.

⁴² On self-sacrifice as an important feature of Roman exempla, see also Walter 2004: 52, Goldschmidt 2013: 155–156.

⁴³ It is notable that the Romans do not have a term for this fundamental quality, but must refer to it with a periphrasis and as a subsection of the virtue of *pietas* (itself perhaps best translated as ‘duty’).

endurance, strategic brilliance, modesty or self-control. As we have seen, Valerius Maximus' version of the Curtius story is told explicitly as an exemplum of *pietas erga patria*, within the chapter bearing that rubric. Generally, in the exempla of Corvinus, Curtius and Mucius, set in the early days of the republic, we see a highly nationalistic tradition, with a strong emphasis on military prowess, on the pre-eminence of Rome and of masculinity, and on state-endorsed status and power; the importance of obtaining official permission before entering into single combat or other such missions is often emphasised. In many Roman texts, such patriotism is the foremost of all virtues, to which all others yield, and it also constitutes the greater good for the sake of which most heroic deeds are performed.⁴⁴ As Valerius Maximus puts it, in his preface to the chapter on *pietas erga patriam*:

Even the authority of parents (which is equal to the divine powers of the gods) subordinates its powers to the majesty of patriotism, and fraternal affection too yields freely and with equanimity, indeed with the highest reason, because when a household is destroyed the republic can still remain, but the ruin of the city will inevitably drag all households down with it.

cuius maiestati etiam illa, quae deorum numinibus aequatur, auctoritas parentum vires suas subicit, fraterna quoque caritas animo aequo ac libenter cedit, summa quidem cum ratione, quia eversa domo integer rei publicae status manere potest, urbis ruina penates omnium secum trahat necesse est (Val. Max. 5.6.pr.).

An important contribution of the Curtius story is in building this sense of patriotic national identity. Just as it was the divine aid offered by the raven that enabled Corvinus to put the threatening Gauls in their place and establish Rome's dominance, Curtius' story is also about the Romans' relationship with the gods. It is also a story about the qualities that make Rome great, and the action is emphatically located in both the Roman city – in the heart of the city – as an eternal space and in Roman history within which that space endures as Roman. (Indeed this is a story that only makes sense when it unfolds in this very specific urban location). The eternity of Rome and the preservation of the city as Roman are guaranteed by Rome's greatness and by the enduring support of the gods. Moreover, the greater good for which the deed is performed is this very enduring security and safety of Rome.

⁴⁴ This patriotic frame is, however, a feature that is subject to change in the first century, see Chapter II.

The solipsism of this story is unremarkable in the context of Roman morality, which is comfortable placing Rome at the centre of the moral universe, with the ethical pre-eminence of the Roman community radiating outwards into the rest of the world.⁴⁵ In its own terms, in the context of Roman exemplarity, this is not a story whose significance is merely parochial; the wider significance of this story for people beyond the Roman citizenry would have been evident, for Roman virtue is human virtue, and, according to the lore of Roman exemplarity, the Romans have much to teach the rest of the world about morality.⁴⁶ In Curtius' story, set in the very heart of Rome, Roman military pre-eminence within the Mediterranean is explained by means of universal qualities in which Romans happen to excel, and about which they can and should teach the world, because they are also qualities to which all human beings should aspire.⁴⁷ Thus every exemplum, no matter how Roman, and how dedicated to the promotion of Roman national pride, aims to tell us something not just about what it means to be Roman but also about what it means to be human.

The exemplary stories of Corvinus, Mucius and Curtius point us towards some of the common philosophical motifs that are found throughout Roman exemplary ethics. These include both the moral values that tend to be promoted by these stories and the more abstract philosophical issues that exemplarity itself raises. On the former, we might include personal qualities such as physical and mental courage, decisiveness, military prowess, willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of a higher good, loyalty towards the community and the Roman people, discipline and obedience (note that Corvinus asks for permission before he takes on the Gaul in combat, Mucius asks the senate's permission before heading off to Porsenna's camp).⁴⁸ Other broader philosophical issues that are raised by such exemplary tales include: the role of the lone hero within the community; the dynamics of imitation and the reproduction of virtue; issues of

⁴⁵ We see this conception of Rome's ethical preeminence reflected in the structure of Valerius Maximus' *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, where most chapters contain a Roman section, followed by a foreign section whose ethical value is less impressive.

⁴⁶ See for instance the numerous places in Valerius Maximus where this idea is expressed, including 6.3.ext.1, 6.5.pr, 6.6.pr, 6.6.5.

⁴⁷ Compare the colonial perspectives of other cultural hegemonies such as modern US and British Empire. We are all human but the very format of Valerius Maximus' book suggests that Romans are not only central but superior; there is a strong level of identification between 'Roman' and 'morally superior'.

⁴⁸ Contrast the unhappy son of Manlius Torquatus, who fails to get permission for his single combat (discussed in [Chapter 5](#)).

ethical evaluation and how one decides what one's ethical priorities are; the role of patriotism and its limitations; and chronological tensions, such as anxieties about moral decline and the iterability of pristine virtue.

The issue of evaluation, and of how one judges what is worthwhile and what is appropriate, is fundamental to Roman exemplary ethics.⁴⁹ Here we can see that the Curtius story, for instance, dramatises the question of what the Roman people's most valuable asset might be. Both Valerius Maximus and Livy, despite their apparently unequivocal validation of Curtius' move, nevertheless do equivocate in some way; the Roman people, acknowledging the brilliance of Curtius' interpretation of the situation and paying tribute to it by making their own, less dramatic, sacrifice, throw into the chasm after him *grain*. This fundamental foodstuff was a necessity of life. The means to live, an adequate food supply for the population, as we know from other exemplary tales, is also a most valuable asset. Rome cannot, after all, survive on heroic self-sacrifice alone.

A notable feature of Curtius' exemplary tale (which sometimes arouses discomfort in modern readers) is that it requires Curtius to identify *himself* as Rome's most valuable asset. In modern Britain, for instance, modesty is prized, and the act of identifying oneself as virtuous risks itself undermining one's virtue. Not only does Curtius step forward into the limelight in order to act, he also explicitly chooses himself as the best; or, at least, he must decide that he can best represent Rome's greatest asset symbolically. There is no room for excessive modesty here, even though self-abnegation is simultaneously required. Similarly, Corvinus is described as stepping forward as 'both fearlessly and modestly' (*intrepide modesteque*, Gell. 9.11.13).⁵⁰ He achieves his victory partly 'relying on his own courage' (*sua virtute nixus*) but also with a little help from the divine raven. While the raven represents the divine aid that confirms that the gods are on Rome's side, it also serves to keep the hero humble by reminding him that he cannot rely solely on his own courage and prowess; his success depends, too, on the wider context of the gods' support for Rome and on the whims of fate. This combination of bravery and modesty is a common and uneasy pairing in tales of exemplary heroism. Indeed, the question of how to reconcile such tensions is one of the philosophical issues that these stories put into debate. Curtius' move is at once self-abnegating and self-aggrandising. He both subordinates his own needs as an individual

⁴⁹ See further discussion in Chapters 5 and 13.

⁵⁰ Compare with the tension in the representation of Maoist heroes, such as Wang Chei (see the discussion later in this chapter, and Sheridan 1968).

entirely to the needs of his country and community, and, with the same act, marks himself out as a special member of that community, claiming for himself a special status and securing himself eternal fame and glory. This paradox of the co-existence of self-sacrifice and self-promotion is an inherent feature of Roman exemplarity and a significant one; it speaks to broader issues that spill out beyond Roman exemplarity into more generally applicable questions with which Roman ethics is concerned, such as: How can ordinary people be expected to emulate exceptional heroes? What ought to motivate heroism? Is it acceptable to aspire to fame and glory? How can exemplarity encourage conformity and discipline among members of a community at the same time as rewarding exceptionality and initiative? Such questions preoccupied the Romans, and they have also preoccupied other people living in other cultures who are interested in heroism and ethics.⁵¹ The tension between the selfless desire to sacrifice oneself and the selfish desire to be *the one* to sacrifice oneself is nicely skewered by an episode of the recent BBC television drama *Merlin*, where the noble aspirations of three exceptional young men – Merlin, Arthur and Lancelot – are reduced to farce as they tussle with one another at the mouth of the chasm for the privilege of being the hero who throws himself to his doom and saves the world.⁵²

Another significant feature of Roman exempla more generally is the tension between the hero as both exceptional and representative of the wider community. These three stories share with many of the best known and most widely circulated exempla the motif of the protagonist as lone hero, daring to step forward when the rest of the community is paralysed with indecision. In each of these tales, Curtius, Mucius and Corvinus are represented as the only one prepared to step up when no one else is able to, and to take the burden of the state onto his own shoulders.

In Livy's account, Curtius' unique position as the only man to come up with a plan is once again emphasised. While the rest of Rome puzzles about what they should do, Curtius berates them: 'Then they say that Marcus Curtius, a young man and outstanding warrior, castigated them as they stood hesitating and wondering whether there was any Roman good greater than military strength and valour' *tum M. Curtium, iuvenem bello egregium, castigasse ferunt dubitantes an ullum magis Romanum bonum quam arma virtusque esset* (Liv. 7.6). While the other Romans hesitate,

⁵¹ See Sheridan 1968 on Maoist ethics of 1930s–1960s.

⁵² *Merlin* Season 4 episode 2, *The Darkest Hour Part II*, 2011. The parallel with the Curtius legend is clear, though it is perhaps unintentional, responding to the far-reaching resonance of leaps into chasms and substitutionary sacrifice, on which see further in this chapter.

Curtius is the only one who is able to interpret correctly the warning that Rome must sacrifice that which is most valuable to her: he alone understands that what is meant is not anything of material value, but rather the abstract qualities of her military power and courage – *arma virtusque*. Yet what he actually sacrifices to the gods in his subsequent exemplary deed is his own person and his own horse, leaping into the chasm on behalf of the rest of Roman manpower. Curtius chooses himself as the single synecdochic representative of the strength and virtue of the community, even while it is apparent that in his own courage and his strength he actually stands apart from the crowd.

In a recent article, Nadejda Popov-Reynolds has noted the recurrence of the motif in Livy of the exemplary hero as the last and only hope for the city.⁵³ Cincinnatus, for instance, is also described by Livy as *unica spes* ('the only hope') for Rome. Again and again, exempla conjure up a Rome that is down to its last hero, depleted of these heroic qualities except for in the person of a single man who is prepared to step forward. This notion of recurrent reliance on a single hero serves to complicate the rhetoric of pristine virtue, which is also such an important feature of Roman exempla, and this produces an interesting conundrum.⁵⁴ On the one hand, Rome prides itself on having a multitude of exemplary tales on which it can draw to prove its history of heroism; this is a motif that one finds again and again in the sources.⁵⁵ On the other hand, in any given story, the rest of Rome or the rest of the army are useless – the community is unable to respond effectively to the crisis and it is the hero alone on whom everything rests.

Inevitably there arises a tension between the requirement that the hero and his deeds be exceptional, extraordinary and awe-inspiring and the requirement that the deeds be capable of imitation and replication. The 'singularity' of the exemplum, who is selected out of the masses as outstanding, and yet used to prescribe norms for everybody, is conceptually challenging, and has been the focus of some discussion, not only in relation to ancient Roman exempla, but in relation to the concept of the exemplar more generally in post-classical thought.⁵⁶ On the one hand exemplary

⁵³ Popov-Reynolds 2010.

⁵⁴ For this motif of the last chance and the only hope, and of the moment of desperation or moral degradation from which Rome must be saved by exemplary action in Latin literature; see further Goldschmidt 2013: 180 *unus homo*, on problematisation of the motif in the *Aeneid*; Feldherr 1998; Popov Reynolds 2010; Haimson Lushkov 2015: 120 *unus vir* (discussing Marcius, Horatius Cocles, Camillus, Fabius Maximus).

⁵⁵ E.g. Sen. *Ep.* 24.2; Cic. *Sest.* 48.

⁵⁶ See Lowrie 2007, Pasco-Pranger 2015: 300, n. 13. This tension between exemplarity and singularity in exempla was put under scrutiny by Derrida (see Harvey 2002); see also Stierle 1998 on the tension

heroes are exceptional and on the other they are held up for others as normative models for imitation. One question that is raised is how far these heroes can be taken as representative of their community and how far they are instead unusual members of that community. How far can they hold up models of desirable behaviour that others might be expected to imitate and aspire to and how far does their behaviour take them outside the community?

The plot of Mucius' tale itself incorporates one aspect of this complex tension between singularity and exemplarity. The bold claim 'I am not alone' uttered by a hero on a solo mission embodies the Roman conundrum. Mucius is portrayed both as representative of Roman virtue and of the Roman community as a whole, and as the only man in Rome who actually possesses Roman virtue at this moment. He claims that his dramatic self-mutilation demonstrates not only his own powers of physical endurance but also those of his fellow countrymen. He also claims explicitly that he is not alone, but that he is only one of many (three hundred) young men who are queuing up to try and kill the king. Indeed, in some versions the implication is that it is this claim that leads Porsenna to want to make his peace with the Romans.⁵⁷ Yet Mucius' claim that he is literally one of many is, of course, explicitly untrue. Mucius is represented as Rome's *unica spes*, the only Roman who had the guts and the drive to come up with a plan when it looked as if Rome was doomed. Given this, it is also untrue that at the time he was representative of Rome's national character as embodied by its citizens as a whole.

Livy's extended account brings out these tensions especially clearly. At the start of the story the uniqueness of Mucius is emphasised – he is the only one to come up with the idea of the mission to assassinate Porsenna and he undertakes it on his own. This primes the reader to recognise the startling untruthfulness of Mucius' boast to Porsenna 'I am not alone', which is making a claim about Roman national virtue: Mucius tells Porsenna, 'I am not alone in waging this attack against you; there is a long queue behind me of men seeking the same honour' (*nec unus in te ego hos animos gessi; longus post me ordo est idem petentium decus*, Liv. 2.12.10). Mucius claims to be just one of many, the first in a huge crowd of young

in Renaissance literature and the articles in Lowrie and Lüdemann 2015. One idea in circulation is that it is the modern self – a modern form of subjectivity emerging in the eighteenth century and seeing the individual as unique and not replicable – that has rendered exemplarity problematic; I think this claim is based on a pervasive failure to appreciate the complexity of Roman exemplary ethics that I hope to counter in my own work.

⁵⁷ E.g. Liv. 2.13.1, Florus 1.4.8, Plut. *Pop.* 17.

men who are queuing up to follow in his footsteps, a mere representative of the *iuventus Romana*. Mucius' very claim, bogus as it is, that there are three hundred like him back in Rome, serves to emphasise his actual singularity, and so these basic plot elements highlight the notion that Mucius is exceptional among Romans, even as he claims to be representative.

On the other hand, Romans of the first century BCE onwards continued to think of Mucius as representative of Roman greatness, even if this was not described as having been the case at the time of the deed itself. Cicero called upon the story of Mucius as testimony to the character of the Roman people – able to face down the fear of death in the service of some greater cause (Cic. *Sest.* 48). The story is regularly cited among lists of heroes who together represent the heroic character of Rome, the list format drawing attention to their plurality and the iterability of their heroism. So the consensus holds Mucius at one and the same time as both typical of eternal Romanness and like no one else in Rome in his own time. This is a puzzling contradiction, but it is also a contradiction that is fundamental to Roman exempla and exemplarity, and at play in many other exempla. The heroic deed must be at the same time both imitable and superlative.⁵⁸

Associated with this is another contradictory tension found throughout the ancient sources which David Levene has described as the inherent anachronism of exempla; on the one hand the past is revered as a time of virtue from which the present has degenerated, but on the other, those admirable past examples of erstwhile virtue were always generated during previous times of moral crisis for the state.⁵⁹ Levene's case study is Sallust's representation of Cato the Elder in the *De Catilina*. According to the moral chronology that Sallust sets out in this work, morals start declining after the destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE. Cato the Elder (234–149 BCE), the censor who railed against the vice of his day, stands as a representative of the kind of ancestral virtue that was subsequently eroded by the introduction of luxury goods and by the idleness that followed the annihilation of the enemy who had kept the Romans keen. Yet Cato's *virtus* is manifested by his censorious quality and the fact that in his upright and strict morality he stood apart from the crowd in his own day; the fact that even in those days there was need of a man such as Cato the Elder to rail against vice undermines the idea of pristine virtue. Another example of such contradiction is Valerius Maximus' paradoxical introduction to the

⁵⁸ Lyons describes these co-existing features of exempla as iterativity and rarity (Lyons 1989: 26–28, 32–33).

⁵⁹ Levene 2000.

Roman virtue of military discipline, in chapter 2.7. In his preface to the chapter, he describes military discipline as preserved intact in Rome through the ages, but he proceeds immediately to list two exemplary moments when discipline had been allowed to slacken drastically, and a hero had to step in and tighten things up.⁶⁰ For all its historical realism and chronological awareness, Roman exemplarity operates in its own form of eternal Sisyphean recursiveness, where the forward thrust of exemplarity is always countered by the slippery slope of moral degeneration. The direr the situation, the more prominently the hero steps forward. Like the superhero of modern comics, the exemplary hero needs to act in the context of an eternally regenerating moral degeneration, criminality or crisis. In the exemplary framework, Rome is always in need of a regular moral ‘reboot’ that both models itself on the exempla of former times and also constantly forgets that those earlier reboots were needed. A striking instance of this compulsive return to the initial moment of crisis and exemplary intervention is found in Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ account of the life of the Roman hero Cincinnatus. In the traditional story, Cincinnatus is famously ‘called from the plough’ to save Rome. In Dionysius’ account this famous event happens not once but twice, first in 458 BCE and then in 439 BCE to put down the conspiracy of Sp. Maelius; the second time Dionysius tells the story there is no acknowledgement that the events have already taken place before, in almost identical circumstances.⁶¹

This simultaneous belief in the clichés of ‘the last hope’ and ‘the golden age of virtue’ parallels the other tensions within the Roman idea of exemplarity, where, in the broader context, exempla oscillate between exceptional and representative, and between normative and aspirational. In terms of using these exempla for moral learning, the anachronism allows for the simultaneous application of the carrot and the stick to the moral learner. The moral excellence of the past, in that golden time when all those famous Roman heroes flourished, is used as a stick to beat the moral agent in the degenerate present. Yet the fact that these heroes operated in the context of the degeneracy of their own era, and that their intervention was required, functions as the precedent that reassures the moral learner that it is always possible to redeem the present once more and restore moral order.⁶² These moments of redemption also stress the role of the individual

⁶⁰ This conundrum and its implications are discussed in Langlands 2008.

⁶¹ See Dion. Hal. 10.23.5–25.4.

⁶² For exempla as applying carrot and stick approach see Chapter 4 on emulation, and Langlands forthcoming. Cf. Walter 2004: 51–62 on the idea that exempla represent past achievements and therefore show that virtue is worth striving for.

working on behalf of the community, and are thereby motivational for the individual moral learner who is led to appreciate how much difference an individual can make to the course of history. They also provide, by the same token, a warning that individuals must take responsibility for preserving what they deem valuable.

Valerius' final commentary upon the story of Curtius is 'From that time great honours shone out in the Roman forum, and no exemplum to this day comes to mind of patriotism more illustrious than that of Curtius.'⁶³ This line makes explicit another tension: the troubling chronological-ethical principle upon which exemplarity precariously rests. It establishes a paradigm, familiar in Roman ethical thought, of a golden age of virtue, long in the past, from which the present has degenerated. Curtius' is the most impressive manifestation of patriotism there has ever been, and others may take inspiration from its brilliance, they may be excited by his virtue and long to become like him. Yet this archetypal exemplum has never yet been matched by anyone who has come after. The past and its heroes and deeds are to be venerated and imitated because of their ethical excellence, but the notion of the past as a moral paradigm may entail the moral inferiority of the present. Roman exemplarity encourages the sense of constant striving to reach the excellence of an earlier time; yet this might, in fact, never be attainable (supererogation).⁶⁴ People may be doomed to second-rateness if they attempt to emulate him. No one to this day has ever achieved the heights of Curtius' action, and perhaps no one ever will. The practice of imitation carries with it the risk of failure to live up to the excellence of the model.⁶⁵ Valerius' comment is used explicitly to frame the exemplum and a reader's relation to it. The idea that the time of great virtue is past is one of the most important of the meta-exemplary, motivational threads that run through Roman exemplarity ethics.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, having emphasised the unmatched pre-eminence of Curtius' deed, in the following sentence Valerius marks the transition to the next story in terms of similarity. This next exemplum tells the tale of Genucius Cipus, who condemned himself to permanent exile in response to a prophecy which said that he would become king of Rome if he ever re-

⁶³ *Nullum tamen hodieque pietate Curtii erga patriam clarius obversatur exemplum* (Val. Max. 5.6.2).

⁶⁴ On supererogation in relation to Roman exempla, see Langlands 2008.

⁶⁵ These ancient anxieties surrounding the emulation of great exempla and the strategies for negotiating them will be explored in Chapter 4.

⁶⁶ As with many of the claims that appear in exempla and exemplary texts, this claim should not necessarily be taken at face value; it has its own rhetorical function within exemplary discourse, setting up an aspirational goal and a sense of motivating anxiety about whether it can be reached.

entered the city; Valerius introduces it in such a way as to suggest the similarity between the two stories, and encourage the reader again to think of exemplary deeds as repeatable in some form or another: *cui principatum gloriae obtinenti consimile factum subnectam*, ‘to this man who achieved the first place in glory, I now join a similar deed.’ With this phrase linking one exemplum with another on grounds of similarity (an idea that is repeated many times in Valerius Maximus’ work) exempla are represented as forming a chain of connections, where the past is, after all, able to be repeated and exemplarity is manifestly iterative. Corvinus’ story too, woven as it is into a tradition of single combat stories, participates in a similar narrative of optimistic reiteration. Indeed, in Livy’s *Histories*, Corvinus’ tale is explicitly presented as part of a tradition of conscious imitation and reproduction of virtue. First, as we saw, Corvinus explicitly imitates the single combat of his predecessor Torquatus, which has been described earlier in the book.⁶⁷ Later, Camillus rouses his men to fight well against the Gauls by calling on Corvinus himself as an exemplum, ‘pointing at the tribune decked out with the spoils, he cried: “Imitate this man, soldiers, and slaughter a heap of Gauls around their dead leader!”’ (*ostentansque insignem spoliis tribunum, “hunc imitare, miles” aiebat, “et circa iacentem ducem sterne Gallorum catervas”* [7.26.7]).⁶⁸ Livy shows us, in operation, the chain of exemplarity, whereby each act of imitation generates a new exemplum to inspire others.⁶⁹

The exempla have a deictic role, pointing out what certain qualities look like in action. It is also implicit in all the tales that they have an inspirational effect upon both those present to witness them and those who hear about them subsequently. It is important that Curtius’ plunge into the depths of the chasm is described in both Livy’s and Valerius Maximus’ versions of the story as unfolding before a crowd of spectators, just as Corvinus’ fight plays out in the sight of both armies, and Mucius’ deed is witnessed by Porsenna.⁷⁰ Within the story these are not merely the witnesses to his deeds and initial judges who shape its commemoration, but they also model those who are inspired by and learn from exempla. In the wider of context of the Roman military situation of the era when the event

⁶⁷ *M. erat Valerius tribunus militum adulescens, qui haud indigniorem eo decore se quam T. Manlium ratus, prius sciscitatus consulis voluntatem, in medium armatus processit*, (Livy 7.26.2).

⁶⁸ Corvinus also imitates himself; when he is subsequently elected consul, Livy describes him as ‘a rival for his own honours’ (*aemulumque decoris sui*, 7.26.12).

⁶⁹ On this chain of imitation and exemplarity, see Langlands [forthcoming](#) (on *aemulatio*) and [Chapter 5](#).

⁷⁰ On the key role of spectators in establishing the exemplary nature of an action in Roman representations of exemplarity, see Roller [2004](#). On spectacle in Livy, see Feldherr [1998](#).

is set, the inspirational message to Curtius' peers is obvious: the other young men of Rome must seek to emulate Curtius in their readiness to face danger and if necessary they must be ready to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. This is, in the short term, what will enable them to triumph in Italy.⁷¹

Note, however, that it would have done them no good at all merely to imitate Curtius' deed itself, and hurl themselves into the chasm after him like a pack of lemmings.⁷² To emulate the deed of an exemplary figure, it is necessary to do much more than blindly copy exactly *what they do* – behaviour that Matthew Roller has labelled 'structural imitation' and Ruby Blondell has labelled 'slavish imitation'.⁷³ Just as only one hero is needed to engage in single combat and save the whole army in the case of Corvinus, it only takes one hero to close up the chasm with his courageous plunge; others must find their own way to imitate the hero. The emulator must find a way of translating the paradigmatic deed into their own actions through creative imitation. The relationship between the heroic deed, the virtue it embodies and the moral it teaches is a complex one. Moreover, the inspirational qualities they manifest – loyalty, courage, acuity, decisiveness – are relevant and applicable beyond the narrow Roman setting; in [Chapters 4](#) and [5](#) we will explore how they can be implemented across the social spectrum.

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This chapter has given a fairly straightforward account of the archetypal exemplum, illustrating this with the cases of Corvinus, Mucius and Curtius, and it has explored the ethical values associated with this body of stories. We have seen that an exemplum has a simple story structure that is easily remembered and retold. To aid such memorability it will usually have distinctive and significant details, many of which can be clearly visualised by the listener, and which often evoke a strong affective response

⁷¹ The role of the gods in the story of Curtius heightens the meaningfulness of such a sacrifice. On a mortal level, willingness of young men to sacrifice themselves for others will help the Romans to win wars. However, there is also a symbolic exchange taking place between the mortals and the gods. (Such an exchange mirrors the Roman tradition of *devotio* and the fate of many Roman exemplary figures.)

⁷² Compare to the incident at the Kunming Lake in Beijing on 27 November 1966, where a boy falls through the ice and dozens of Maoist would-be-heroes perish as they compete to rescue him: 'Then these also started to drown. The more who attempted rescues, the more who were in need of help' (Sheridan 1968: 69).

⁷³ Roller labels this imitation of specific aspects of behaviour 'structural imitation', as distinguished from 'categorical' imitation, which imitates the wider category or virtue (Roller 2004: 23–24); confusingly, in Blondell's discussion of mimesis in Plato it is labelled 'slavish imitation' in contrast with 'structural imitation' (Blondell 2002: 102).

such as disgust, astonishment or pity. An exemplum has a (supposedly) real person at its heart, who does something amazing or shocking – an act of striking heroism or villainy – which pushes human capacity to its limits, and tells us something, thereby, about human capacity and its limits.

Within a simple and memorable plot, an exemplum has the capacity to communicate a complex wisdom. We have already seen there are ethical tensions at the core even of these simple exemplary tales. On the one hand, they are transmitted and represented in the ancient sources as embodying important cultural values, and they participate in a robust moral framework which privileges such qualities as courage, loyalty and physical endurance. We can infer from looking at these stories as a body what the moral coordinates of Roman exemplary ethics might be. Yet at the same time, Roman literature also shows a constant and embedded awareness of factors that complicate the interpretation of these core cultural narratives. Many of these complicating factors will be the focus of extended discussion in subsequent chapters: indeterminacy of meaning, situational variability, the importance of context and perspective in establishing the significance and value of historical events. The stories that are transmitted as so culturally and morally valuable spill out beyond any attempt to limit their meaning to something clear and definite. Moreover, they put into play big questions without necessarily offering definitive solutions. Their magic is a complex and elusive one: the magic of an engaging narrative that is morally charged and has a very high cultural status in the Roman context, but that provokes ethical deliberation and debate even as it sets up clear parameters within which such debates can take place. Exempla are an excellent medium not only for transmitting values but also for exploring inherent tensions. Drawing on comparative material, the [following chapter](#) further explores the question of how and why short stories like these are able to play a particular and important role within a community, and outlines how such stories can indeed be understood as the lifeblood of an exemplary ethics in ancient Rome.

The Special Capacity of Exemplary Stories

For centuries, exemplary tales of the heroic deeds of ancestral figures were the lifeblood of Roman ethics. They constituted a wisdom genre, just as similar bodies of stories do in other cultures, from Sufi educational tales to Aesopian fables, from Confucian exempla to European folk-tales, from the parables of the Judaeo-Christian tradition to the urban myths circulating in various modern sub-cultures.¹ In this chapter, my own study of Roman exempla will be situated within the wider context of work on comparable studies of ethics and narrative traditions in other cultures, and apply the insights of authors working in other fields to the ancient material. In particular, this chapter establishes that narratives can constitute a special kind of ethical resource within a culture, one that functions in parallel with, and often complements, the moral forms of doctrinal philosophy or religion. It shows that Roman exempla belong to this category of ethical resources, exploiting the particular ethical potential of narrative.

One of the reasons why stories are so important in human ethics across many different cultures and classes is that exemplary narratives provide an accessible means of communicating moral principles and doctrines. In narrative form, abstract moral ideas can be more easily assimilated than when they are communicated with a straightforward exposition of ideas. This notion was familiar to ancient writers: Seneca described exempla as a short cut to comprehension: *quia longum iter est per praecepta, breve et efficax per exempla* ('since the journey is long via precepts, but short and efficient through exempla', Sen. *Ep.* 6.5). In a consolation addressed to his

¹ Moral tales take on different forms in different traditions, and communicate ideas in different ways: as maxims and moral rules, as complex ideas or debates, as 'realist' observations about the way the world is, or as prescriptions about the way the world ought to be. On the phenomenon generally, see Hinchman and Hinchman 1997, Boyd 2009; on specific story traditions, see Warner 2011, Zipes 2012, Carter 2005 on fairy-tales; see Brunwand 1983, Turner 1993 on urban myths, and Donovan 2004 on urban legend on the internet; Yassif 1988 and Yassif 1999: 301–303, 460, 516 on Hebrew folk-tales; see Lei Feng 1963, Sheridan 1968, Wang 1997, Knapp 2008, Jordan 1986, Huang 2010 on exemplary tales in modern Chinese culture; McDaniel 2011, Hallisey and Hanson 1996 on Buddhist storytelling.

friend Marcia on the death of her son Metilius, Seneca asserts that the depth of her grief (she has resisted his attempts to help for three years already) compels him to take drastic measures in his treatment of it, and he will therefore alter the usual procedure for a consolation. Rather than starting with the arguments against death and proceeding to illustrate the arguments with exempla, he will begin with the concrete exempla, in a bid to jolt her out of her unresponsive state and render her open to the philosophical arguments that he will present later in the piece:²

I know people who want to teach someone always start with precepts and end with examples. It will work better to change the practice in this case; different people need to be dealt with differently. Some people are led by reason, but for others famous names need to be brought into play. Dazzled by impressive appearance, such people are led by an authority that doesn't leave the mind free. I shall set before your eyes the two greatest exempla of your sex and age.

scio a praeceptis incipere omnis qui monere aliquem volunt, in exemplis desinere. mutari hunc interim morem expedit; aliter enim cum alio agendum est: quosdam ratio ducit, quibusdam nomina clara opponenda sunt et auctoritas quae liberum non relinquit animum ad speciosa stupentibus. duo tibi ponam ante oculos maxima et sexus et saeculi tui exempla (Sen. *ad Marc.* 2.1).

Seneca begins therefore by showing Marcia, through concrete examples, two different ways of coping with grief that are exemplified by the behaviour of two exemplary women: Octavia and Livia. Once Marcia has been suitably dazzled and impressed by this non-rational means of persuasion, he will be able to move on to the second part of the treatise where the abstract arguments for laying aside one's grief are set out.³ There is a distinct hierarchy set up between the rational, philosophically engaged person for whom *ratio* (reason) is enough, and the kind of person who is motivated by exempla because they are dazzled by their superficial impressiveness.⁴ The same hierarchy – which corresponds to social hierarchies – structures the Greek writer Strabo's discussion of the important role of moral stories in moral development. In the introduction to his work of geography, stories are described as most suitable for the moral education of children and the uneducated, as an enticing prelude to more abstract and challenging moral thinking:

² For this reading, see Shelton 1995; cf. Morgan 2007a: 286–290 on the passage in the context of the relationship between popular morality and philosophy.

³ Seneca *Ad Marciam* 2.1, 2.2.

⁴ A similar idea is found in Seneca's *Ep.* 120 in the context of moral education, discussed in Chapter 4.

First of all, I say that the poets were not alone in welcoming stories, but long before them the cities and the lawgivers had welcomed them as useful, understanding as they did the natural susceptibility of the rational animal; for a human being loves to learn, and the love of story-telling is the prelude to this. This quality leads children to listen to tales and increasingly to engage with them . . . At first it is necessary to use such [wonderful, fictional] stories as bait, but as the youth grows older he must learn the facts about things, when his critical faculty is stronger and he no longer needs to be enticed. And the uneducated and illiterate person is similar to a child and loves stories in the same way. And the half-educated person is the same; for he is not strong when it comes to the reasoning faculty, and the habits of childhood also linger on.

καὶ πρῶτον ὅτι τοὺς μύθους ἀπεδέξαντο οὐχ οἱ ποιηταὶ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ αἱ πόλεις πολὺ πρότερον καὶ οἱ νομοθέται τοῦ χρησίμου χάριν, βλέψαντες εἰς τὸ φυσικὸν πάθος τοῦ λογικοῦ ζῴου: φιλειδήμων γὰρ ἄνθρωπος, προοίμιον δὲ τούτου τὸ φιλόμυθον. ἐντεῦθεν οὖν ἄρχεται τὰ παιδία ἀκροᾶσθαι καὶ κοινωνεῖν λόγων ἐπὶ πλεῖον . . . κατ' ἀρχὰς μὲν οὖν ἀνάγκη τοιοῦτοις δελέασαι χρῆσθαι, προϊούσης δὲ τῆς ἡλικίας ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν ὄντων μάθησιν ἄγειν, ἥδη τῆς διανοίας ἑρρωμένης καὶ μηκέτι δεομένης κολάκων. καὶ ἰδιώτης δὲ πᾶς καὶ ἀπαιδευτος τρόπον τινὰ παῖς ἐστὶ φιλομυθεῖ τε ὡσαύτως: ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ὁ πεπαιδευμένος μετρίως: οὐδὲ γὰρ οὗτος ἰσχύει τῷ λογισμῷ, πρόσσεστι δὲ καὶ τὸ ἐκ παιδὸς ἔθος (Strab. *Geog.* 1.2.8).

Such articulations in ancient literature encourage us to think of exempla as a rather basic, though useful, tool of moral education, representing the first rungs on the ladder of moral learning; they are presented as especially suitable as learning tools for those who do not (yet) have the capacity for complex and abstract moral reasoning. They are offered as a prelude to something more intellectually substantial, a way of luring into philosophical reasoning those who might otherwise be reluctant to engage. Certainly, exempla do play these elementary and invitational roles in moral education in ancient Rome, as we shall see in later chapters.⁵ Despite this, however, we should not think of stories merely as a way of dumbing down sophisticated moral concepts, and as a means of communicating ideas in a simplified way to those who are not clever or educated enough to understand the pure theory. Instead, narratives like Roman exempla should be thought of as having a *special capacity* for communicating moral ideas. Indeed, they may even be capable of communicating kinds of truths that cannot easily be expressed in a propositional form.

⁵ Chapters 6 and 7 argue that children and adults may respond to and handle exempla differently, and that exempla offer something different for people at different stages of life and moral development.

In explaining what I mean by this, the various story traditions of Sri Lanka, China and Thailand provide useful comparisons to Roman exempla. In their discussion of the role of traditional stories in Sri Lankan Buddhist ethics, for instance, Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen have argued that they should not be conceived as a supplement or accessory to philosophical literature and formal doctrine, but rather as a complement to these. Many scholars, it seems, have effectively dismissed the Buddhist Theravāda stories as mere folk-tales, with a thin veneer of Buddhist doctrine; for Hallisey and Hansen, on the other hand, they constitute the lifeblood of everyday Buddhism, the very medium through which one learns to become a Buddhist.⁶ They cite Sri Lankan scholar Ranjini Obeyesekere as saying: '[W]e . . . listened to many many Buddhist stories. That was how we learned to be Buddhist.'⁷ Similar assertions can be made of the role of stories in Chinese Confucianism: 'The majority of Chinese became acquainted with Confucianism not through . . . philosophical texts but through stories of notable men and women whose actions embodied the Confucian teachings.'⁸ These various Asian traditions provide models for understanding how stories can be an important resource for ethical development and acculturation in different settings, and can also provide a complement and an alternative to the formal teachings of religion and philosophy. In a similar fashion, I shall suggest, traditional Roman exempla made up the body of stories within a story-telling tradition through which members of Roman culture learned to be moral agents and learned to be Roman. They are at the heart of a practical ethics that people learned not necessarily by studying texts, but by sharing and discussing stories within their community.

In their discussion of the Sri Lankan Buddhist stories, Hallisey and Hansen make the appealing argument that narratives have something particular to offer Buddhist ethics, because they are able to retain and convey the complexity of moral ideas within their narrative structures in a way that can be superior to doctrine or non-narrative exposition. For

⁶ Hallisey and Hansen (1996): 310, citing Gananath Obeyesekere 1991: 231: the stories 'were once the lifeblood of everyday Buddhism . . . yet [they] are almost never part of the scholarly discussion in the modern literature of Buddhism. [The] almost total neglect of [stories] in Buddhist Studies is because they have been relegated as unimportant folktales that have little to do with the profoundly philosophical corpus.'

⁷ R. Obeyesekere 1991: x.

⁸ Knapp 2008: 40. See also McDaniel 2011 for the fundamental role of folk-tales in Thai Buddhism; they often present a different set of values from those that are espoused by the orthodox religious texts; see further the discussion of the implications of McDaniel's work for our understanding of Roman exempla within a socially diverse culture in the following chapter.

instance, analysing a specific Buddhist Theravāda story about karma – the tale of the death of the judge Bandhula – they conclude that the story evokes a sense of what it feels like to experience karma in everyday life. In their view, the story is able to preserve the conflict and complexity of that experience in a form that is not available in the Buddhist doctrine on the subject of karma. The tale is about the honest judge Bandhula, a just and good man who, together with all his sons, is summarily beheaded for a crime none of them has committed, on the basis of untrue accusations made against them by corrupt officials who resent the man's probity. The wife and mother of these men, Mallika, calmly shrugs off the news of their deaths as the operation of karma, telling her bereaved daughters-in-law that her husband and sons were 'free from guilt, and have merely reaped the fruit of misdeeds in previous states of existence . . . ' Her words pronounce upon the workings of karma, while leaving unresolved its central contradictions about justice and suffering. As Hallisey and Hansen say, the contradictory message of her words is that '*innocent Bandhula got what he deserved*', and they comment: 'We feel that this story is quite realistic in its portrayal of an ordinary experience of karma, with all its unresolved contradictions between responsibility and innocence.'⁹ Buddhist doctrine on karma may teach that there is no such thing as undeserved suffering, and that the man's execution must be accepted as just punishment for crimes committed in a previous existence, but the story itself is more nuanced than this: '[T]his story allows enough space for any person to feel – justifiably – that this particular bit of suffering is unwarranted . . . This frank depiction of competing attitudes, without flinching and collapsing one into the other, is what is impressive about this story. It gives voice simultaneously to multiple descriptions of the same events – tragic events – without giving us the information sufficient to choose which is the correct one.'¹⁰

Roman exempla too, with their simple yet troubling narratives, are capable of simultaneously voicing multiple responses to the same event. If we return to the story of Curtius and the chasm, we can perceive that it has a similar narrative capacity to convey ethical richness to the Bandhula story.¹¹ It is not merely that Curtius' deed enacts virtuous qualities such as courage and patriotism. There are other moral ideas woven into the plot as well, of greater complexity – for instance, those relating to the idea of the

⁹ Hallisey and Hansen (1996): 318. ¹⁰ Hallisey and Hansen (1996): 318.

¹¹ See also my analysis of the ethical ideas put into play through the ancient exemplum of Lucretia in Langlands 2006: 80–96.

attribution of value.¹² The plot can be read as dramatising the realisation that true value lies not (only) in money and material wealth, but primarily in Rome's military power, which in turn depends on the soldiers themselves and on their courage and motivation. The idea that courage and people matter more than money may seem on the face of it like an obvious and 'trite' moral message, one which we are familiar with in our own culture; however, it is not a *fact* that one can learn once and for all and then always carry with one. Rather, it is an ethical principle with which one constantly struggles in everyday life, today as in ancient Rome; it is not an easy matter consistently to prioritise the moral over the material as we live, even if we 'know' this is the right thing to do. The brief plot of the Curtius story does more than merely communicate the principle that people and valour are more important than money; it also acknowledges that this principle is not always obvious, and not always easy to apply, and that it is easy to be confused about what one's priorities should be – especially in a moment of crisis.

Livy's version of the story of Curtius and his chasm highlights this aspect of the plot, as Curtius is described as acting against the background of a general bewilderment about how to address the situation.¹³ Through the confusion and uncertainty of the Romans in the face of the strange chasm that has opened up in their midst, the story acknowledges the difficulty of deciding the right thing to do and what to prioritise; as we shall see, this acknowledgement that making moral decisions is difficult is a common feature of Roman exemplary tales. At the same time as representing decisiveness as praiseworthy and necessary, the story expresses sympathy for those who find it difficult to identify or to carry through the virtuous line of action. Like the Buddhist stories discussed by Hallisey and Hansen, a Roman exemplum such as this allows space for 'heterogeneity of judgment'¹⁴ even when, like the karma story, they are also strongly advocating a particular moral position as the best one.

Although an exemplary narrative may be used to illustrate a particular moral precept or concept, the meaning of the narrative itself cannot adequately be reduced to a simple statement or proposition.¹⁵ Compare

¹² As suggested in the [previous chapter](#), Valerius Maximus' depiction of the people throwing in grain after Curtius draws attention to the multiple places where value can be seen to lie.

¹³ This is another aspect of the 'lone hero' (*unus homo*) motif that is prevalent in Roman exemplary ethics, discussed in the [previous chapter](#).

¹⁴ Hallisey and Hansen 1996: 315–316.

¹⁵ As Scanlon writes in relation to an apparently simple medieval Christian exemplum: '[I]f one attempts to trace [this] apparent translation of moral to plot, one quickly discovers that the two

this description of historical exempla in Chinese thought: ‘Chinese notions collapse when abstracted from the exempla from which they point . . . This concrete story indispensably “knots” the “cord” of actuality in a way no abstract concept could.’¹⁶ As I hope to show over the course of this book, this capacity of stories to convey moral knots without needing to resolve, slice through or collapse them is something that Roman exempla exploit fully; one of their most important functions in Roman culture was as communicators of ethical complexity, and as vehicles of ethical debate, focusing discussion around key issues and controversies. Like other story forms, Roman exempla enhance ethical understanding because of the ability of stories to acknowledge within their plots ethical difficulties or complexities that it is hard to communicate effectively in any other way. A single narrative (or better still a series or collection of narratives) can communicate the complexity of a concept such as courage or justice, in a way that a simple definition or a logical philosophical exposition cannot.¹⁷

Roman exempla easily incorporate moral ambiguity and troubling elements, similar to the karma story discussed earlier. For instance, even in the case of Mucius’ archetypal patriotic and heroic tale, there are also aspects of the hero’s behaviour that may invite the learner to speculate about the moral value of his exemplum. Some aspects of Mucius’ behaviour – especially the strong elements of ingenuity, strategy, deceit and trickery – border on the unethical and raise interesting questions about the parameters of Roman morality and the boundaries between what counts as ethical and what does not. These strategic skills, a cluster of attributes relating to what I will summarise with the term ‘ingenuity’, are not part of the core Roman canon of virtues, and are rarely highlighted as morally praiseworthy in the extant ancient sources (there are no obvious laudatory Latin terms that describe them).¹⁸ This sort of strategic approach to dealing with the enemy, where plot and trick are the weapons rather than sheer

are inseparable, that the moral can only be apprehended narratively’ (Scanlon 1994: 30, also cited in Allen 2005: 4).

¹⁶ Chun-chieh Huang 2010: 127.

¹⁷ A series of exempla is often used to show that an apparently simple moral idea is more complex than it might appear. This is often how the stories seem to work in a collection, such as that of Valerius Maximus, where the stories collected under a particular heading both illustrate that heading and then, as we move through the list, begin to offer us a way of destabilising that category. See Langlands 2006 (*pudicitia*), 2008 (*severitas*), 2011 (*fiducia*).

¹⁸ An equivalent Latin term for ingenuity is *sollertia*, which is used of military cunning, but has a more general sense of intelligence and shrewdness; this term is not however used widely in exemplary accounts. The strategies used are called *insidiae* or *dolus* (‘trap’ and ‘trick’) neither of which term has morally positive connotations, associated, as they are, with lies and deceit. These skills (*artes*) are

military strength, is a common theme of ancient sources related to strategy in warfare,¹⁹ and also constitutes an important motif in the exempla tradition in general. However, its relation to the discourses of national and personal virtue is, of course, an uneasy one, since it brings in an element of ruthless pragmatism, raising issues about what kind of behaviour can be justified in war, where the line is to be drawn and how far the end can justify the means. The alleged deceitful strategies of non-Roman combatants (especially Carthaginians) are roundly criticised in the Roman sources.²⁰ On the other hand, the story of the hostage taken at Cannae who tries to invalidate his pledge to the Carthaginians by sneaking back into the camp before he sets off to Rome is an exemplum which characterises Roman deceit and trickery as ethically wrong and sees it severely punished by the senate.²¹ Most exempla, as we shall see in the course of this book, contain elements of this kind of moral borderline or uncertainty, where we can see that what is enacted is not simply a case of unproblematic heroism, but a situation of friction, where moral virtue rubs up against other kinds of behaviour, values and concerns.²² Mucius' story is not a straightforward case of a hero displaying virtue, but is also an opportunity to bring into play more complex moral issues.

The plot of Mucius' tale demonstrates the quality of ingenuity, especially in his ability to devise further strategies for Rome's benefit on not one

however represented more positively in the context of military theory, where they often constitute or underpin *strategemata*; Frontinus, in the preface to his handbook of military strategy, translates this into Latin as *sollertia facta* ('cunning deeds') (Front. 1.1). Dionysius describes Mucius as planning to trick the king; the Greek term used is *katastrategesai* (Dion. Hal. 5.29.3). On 'tricksterism' in Latin literature and history see Leigh 2004, and especially pages 82–86; he also lists relevant Latin terms on p. 46: *astus*, *callidus*, *calliditas*, *dolus*, *fallere*, *fallax*, *fallacia*, *fraus*, *frustratio*, *frustrari*, *ludibrium*, *ludificatio*, *simulare* and compounds, such as *assimulare* and *dissimulare*. Cf. Farrell 2001: 30–32 on Valerius Maximus' claim at 7.4.pr. that the Romans don't have a word for the Greek 'strategems'; Farrell lists the Latin (near) synonyms that Valerius in fact uses in the course of his chapter (*astutia*, *calliditas*, *consilium*, *dissimulatio*, *dolus*, *fallacia*, *insidiae* and *prudentia*), commenting 'the possibility also exists, however, that Valerius simply did not want to use a Latin word that might adequately render the idea because he preferred to name trickery with a foreign word in order to mark such behaviour as un-Roman' (30).

¹⁹ E.g. Val. Max. 7.4.2–5, and the handbooks of military strategy of Polyaeus and Frontinus.

²⁰ See Leigh 2004: 46–47.

²¹ Livy 22.61.4–10; Val. Max 2.9.8; Cic. *Off.* 1.39–40, also Polyb. 6.58. This story is often paired and contrasted with that of Regulus and his loyalty and virtue, on which see Chapters 12 and 13.

²² As we shall see in Chapter 12, the context of war provides a useful backdrop for an exemplum, placing at stake the highest concerns, such as life and death, freedom and national security and subjecting an exemplum's protagonists to the kind of pressures that test their capacity for virtue to the utmost and clearly highlight moral issues. Heroic behaviour involves risk and compromise, not merely to one's own life, but sometimes to ethical principles. The key is to ascertain what is worth fighting for. In the work of Valerius Maximus we can see the proximity, and indeed the overlap, between moral exempla and military *strategemata* that is also illustrated by the case of Mucius.

but two occasions when all seems to be lost: first during the initial siege, and second after his own capture by Porsenna. First he comes up with the plan to try and assassinate Porsenna, and this is in the face of general despair in the besieged city of Rome, where others have given up hope (*gravi et diutino bello*, ‘during a serious and long-lasting war’, Val. Max. 3.1.1). Then, Mucius finds himself the prisoner of his enemy, threatened with torture, and knowing that if he reveals the desperation of Rome’s situation, Porsenna will realise that the Romans cannot hold out much longer, and will therefore press the siege and win the day, defeating Rome once and for all. So he comes up, on the spur of the moment, with a bold and crafty speech about the strength and courage of the Romans and their determination to hold out against Porsenna and even to come out and fight him themselves. And he seals these lies with the seemingly unanswerable demonstration of his own powers of physical and mental endurance, which appears to support his claims about Roman courage and determination.

Once again, sheer physical endurance beyond belief, as well as perseverance, turns a moment of failure into a moment of heroic triumph. As Catharine Edwards puts it: ‘Mucius . . . is a showman who can turn practical defeat into symbolic victory.’²³ In Livy’s version of the story, this wilful inversion of the expected power differential in a situation is epitomised by the narrator’s comment: ‘Even then among so many menaces of fortune he himself was to be feared rather than afraid’ (*tum quoque inter tantas fortunae minas metuendus magis quam metuens*, Livy 2.12). The ability to turn a dire situation to one’s advantage is a valuable and celebrated heroic attribute.²⁴ At the point where Mucius has failed in his mission and has fallen into the power of the enemy, he is about to be tortured and then killed, he manages to – in a clichéd formula – snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

Deception and lies also play a key role in this story, even though, as I have said, they are usually not *celebrated* in the ancient sources, and they are present in some form in all the ancient accounts of Mucius’ deeds. Florus describes Mucius as reaching the king Porsenna ‘through trickery’ (*per insidias*), and then increasing Porsenna’s fear at his burning hand ‘through deceit’ (*terroremque geminare dolo*).²⁵ In some (later, Greek)

²³ Edwards 2007: 89.

²⁴ For the recurrent exemplary motif of transforming apparent defeat into triumph, see also the Regulus story, discussed in Chapters 12 and 13; Val. Max. 3.2.12 for P. Crassus Mucianus who escapes captivity by tricking his captor into killing him, *arcessita ratione*; the smiling slave of Tagus, discussed in Chapter 10.

²⁵ Florus 1.4.10.

versions, Mucius uses disguise in order to gain entry to the Etruscan camp in secret, dressed in Etruscan clothes.²⁶ A key element of all versions of the story is that Mucius is strategically dishonest about the nature of Rome's strength and ability to withstand siege: in most versions he lies to Porsenna about the existence of the three hundred strong body of Romans ready to be sent against him. In Polyaeus' striking version of the story, Mucius even goes so far as to tell Porsenna that the three hundred Romans have *already infiltrated* the camp, and are at that moment surrounding him, ready to strike, undetected and merging with the crowd (Polyaeus *Strategemata* 8.8).

Through incorporating such motifs, Mucius' story is able to tap deep into issues in military ethics that were serious preoccupations in the ancient world, about what behaviour can be justified in war and how to negotiate between pragmatism and integrity.²⁷ Was it right for Mucius to lie to Porsenna about the existence of three hundred more young Roman heroes waiting for the chance to kill him? Was it acceptable, indeed, for him to secretly enter the Etruscan camp in the first place to try and murder Porsenna in a surprise attack, with a dagger hidden up his sleeve? The rich potential of Mucius' story to fuel such ethical debates by provoking moral questions to which there are no definitive answers, but which put important ethical ideas in play, is demonstrated by the way that such questions about Mucius' behaviour were avidly taken up in the sixteenth century by Alberico Gentili, in his dialogue about Roman imperialism, military ethics and the question of the Just War. The focus of Gentili's 1599 dialogue *The Wars of the Romans* is the question of whether the Roman empire was just, and he argues both sides of the debate in turn, portraying Mucius' use of trickery very differently in each case. The attack on Roman ethics in Book 1 claims to rip away the rhetorical veil of Roman virtue to expose the ancient Romans as unjust and devoid of martial excellence.²⁸ In this side of the argument Mucius is attacked for his underhand tactics, and described as a Roman 'Sinon' (the man who persuaded the Trojans to introduce the Trojan horse into Troy); such a comparison ties Mucius into a very long tradition of efficacious but troubling military trickery. The tone of the description of Mucius' behaviour is of outrage:

Moreover, behold: we have that most unjust crime of Scaevola in that war waged by the king, a crime which that assassin undertook with the approval

²⁶ Plut. *Pop.* 17 and Polyaeus 8.8.

²⁷ On the significance of these questions, see Wheeler 1988, Leigh 2004.

²⁸ Gentili, Book 1, chapter 1 (Kinsbury, Straumann and Lupher 2011: 10–11).

of the Roman Senate. For it is not permitted – it simply is not permitted – to lie in wait for your enemies in the manner of the brigand and the assassin. Scaevola lay in wait among the Etruscans, having earlier learned the Etruscan tongue from his nurse. It is not allowed, simply not, to make use of such desperate measures in war that you would wish that your own certain slaughter be always attendant upon that slaughter of a foreigner you are so intent on. For those men are wicked who have no fear of death and so do not refrain from crimes. But just listen to this Roman Sinon and his answer to the excellent king in return for his most merciful feelings towards him: ‘Since among you honor is paid to courage, so that you might get by doing me a favour what you could not get through threats, I shall tell you: three hundred of us have sworn an oath to the youth of Rome to attack you in this manner’ (Gentili, Book 1, [chapter 4](#)).²⁹

In this attack on Roman perfidy, nothing can justify Mucius’ deceit and sneaking around. His behaviour is described as fitting for a common brigand: *latro* (‘thief’) and *sicarius* (‘cut-throat’).

In the following book, on the other hand, which defends the justice of Roman military behaviour, Mucius’ strategies are defended on the grounds that they were justified, indeed necessary, in the extreme circumstances in which Mucius found himself. They are still described as crimes, but crimes that are justified by the need to defend the freedom of the Romans. Here the emphasis is on the justness of the war against Porsenna itself, as the context in which Mucius is operating:

But the people were now free and when internal enemies were troubling them, behold, the war against Porsenna arises, a most just war fought to retain that very same freedom. And it is in the context of this war that the plot of Scaevola needs to be defended by me. And I do defend it. ‘The most extreme dangers always give an excuse for crime’. We know the extreme dangers of the city at that time. Those plots were permissible against a tyrant [Tarquinius Superbus], hence they were permissible against the tyrant’s

²⁹ Translation by Lupher in Kinsbury, Straumann and Lupher 2011: 41, with facing Latin on p. 40: *ecce autem nobis in bello hoc regione iniustissimum illud Scaevolae facinus, quod Romano adprobante senatu sicarius ille aggressus est. neque enim licet, non licet, latronis et sicarii more hostibus insidiari. Latuit inter Etruscos Scaevola: edoctus iam a nutrice Etruscum linguam: non licet, non in bello uti desperatis his rationibus: ut cum aliena caede, cui inheies uni, certam semper caedem tuam coniunctam velis. hi mali sunt qui mortem non timent, nec enim abstinere a delictis. sed audi etiam Sinonem Romanum: et quid regi optimo pro clementissimo in se affectu respondit: quantopere est apud te virtuti honos, ut veneficio tuleris a me, quod minis nequisti: trecenti coniuravimus iuventuti Romane, ut in te hac via graseremur et cetera, quae sequuntur apud Livium plusquam Sinonica. et haec Romanae virtutis sexcenta sunt. Cf. on page 108 the summary of this book with its exempla-style list of Romans in the mode of Seneca: *perfidiam Romuli, fallaciam Tulli, astum Anci, proditorem Bruti, sicam Scaevolae, versutiam Martii, praestigias Labeonis, mentitiones Scipiones, iniurias Anicii, cavillationes Catonis, et id genus alios mores aliorum cepimus, qui sunt expositi* (Book 1, [chapter 13](#) (p. 108)). This passage gives us a good sense of the range of vocabulary that might be used of such techniques, none of it complimentary!*

associate as well . . . These plots are permissible even against a just enemy, and why not, if it is allowed to kill an enemy, should one not do so using plots [*insidias*]? Must even the lie of Mucius be defended? I do defend it. I deny that Scaevola lied about the other conspirators, and as an authority I offer Aristides of Miletus. [Pseudo-Plutarch *Parallela Graeca et Romana* 305 F- 306 A.] I deny [hedging his bets] that it is not permissible to deceive an enemy with a lie; I claim that deceit [*dolos*] against an enemy is good, and a lie is a deceit (Gentili, Book 2, [chapter 4](#)).³⁰

This argument on both sides of the case brings out the ethical issues that are inherent in the plot of Mucius' tale, and demonstrates that there is more at stake in the Roman heroics than might at first appear. Of course, the tensions within the plot of Mucius' tale are framed in Gentili's work by post-classical debates about the Just War, and brought into relief by Christian mores, which recognise common humanity before national loyalties. However, such tensions are by no means a sixteenth-century invention; anxiety and debate about the role of trickery and ambush in warfare are present already in Homeric epic, and in early Greek military theory, where they are viewed in opposition to the heroic code of fighting it out in open battle, reliant only on military strength, as illustrated by the contrast between Achilles and Odysseus.³¹ These themes are present in the plays of Plautus too, suggesting that such questions about the validity of deception and strategy in a war situation were live issues for the Romans from at least as early as the second century BCE.³² Indeed, Plautus' plays explore the ethical ramifications of employing the very same military tricks of disguise and bilingualism that we find in the exemplum of Mucius, and these themes are also explored through later representations of the military behaviour of Hannibal.³³

So Mucius' story enables one to explore many different troubling ethical issues even as it also communicates the value of particular virtues and qualities. Even in its concision of plot and literary form the Roman exemplum has a special capacity to explore complex, ethically challenging and wide-ranging moral issues, just like Greek myths and other story traditions.

³⁰ Translation with Latin: Kinsbury, Straumann and Lupher 2011: 188–191.

³¹ On the emergence of military theory and its opposition to the heroic code, see Wheeler 1988. As Wheeler puts it, strategems are about intelligence and trickery and 'produced "miracles" in achieving what force could not and by less expensive means' (Wheeler 2010: 27).

³² Leigh 2004: 22: 'Yet such intersections are only the starting point for investigation of various discursive categories: the ethical construction of military trickery; the Roman prisoner of war; the conflict between agrarian and mercantile economies; the exercise of imperium and the habit of command.'

³³ Leigh 2004: 28–37.

This claim about the capacity of exempla to incorporate and communicate contradiction and moral complexity is perhaps one of the most radical of my book. It appears to pose a direct challenge to the accepted characterisation of exempla as highly directive, communicating a clear and unambiguous message.³⁴ Exempla are typically represented in modern scholarship as a closed type of story and also as having a rigid and pre-determined meaning.³⁵ Indeed it is the case that, while, like most forms of moral tale, the Roman exemplum strikes a balance between resolution and openness, it does often tend towards resolution – at least in each particular citation and text. As we saw in the [previous chapter](#), in a given text, the generalisable moral of a Roman exemplary tale is usually indicated by surrounding authorial comment, often in the form of an introduction (*exordium*) and a concluding remark; it is this interpretative frame that activates the exemplary function of the historical material.³⁶ When Valerius Maximus cites the exemplum of Curtius, not only does he include it under a category heading of *pietas erga patriam*, so that we can be clear from the start what it is an example or illustration of, but he also reiterates the moral point of the story in a concluding flourish: ‘No exemplum to this day has been seen of patriotism more illustrious than that of Curtius’ (*nullum tamen hodieque pietate Curtii erga patriam clarius obversatur exemplum*, Val. Max. 5.6.2). The moral is made completely explicit, as it often is, for instance, in the case of a fable as well, where there may be an explicit moral *sententia* incorporated into the fable, analogous to the category heading and conclusion in Valerius Maximus’ presentation of exempla.³⁷ Even when there is no explicit moral stated, a clear moral message can be incorporated into a story, either by being explicitly voiced by characters

³⁴ E.g. Chaplin 2000: 170: ‘the early imperial authors regard each exemplum’s meaning as fixed’; cf. Skidmore 1996: 68–73. On the face of it one would assume that rhetorical use of an exemplum to support an argument, or to act as a precedent or proof, would be undermined by any complexity or ambiguity about the moral significance of the exemplary tale. We will see, however, that the ability to create meaning for an exemplary story within a particular context is precisely the skill that is required from users of exempla, whether writers or speakers (see especially [Chapter 7](#)).

³⁵ On exempla being directive and relatively closed, see e.g. Stierle 1970, Maslakov 1984, Gazich 1995; cf. Roller 2015a on exempla as being created precisely when they are placed within particular ‘bins’ or moral categories that give them moral significance.

³⁶ In the formulation of Guerrini 1981.

³⁷ In Fable 126 about the ant and the cricket, the story is capped by a sentence commenting upon the narrative from outside, making it clear that the events of this particular tale are to be generalised and applied to human behaviour as a whole: ‘This fable depicts lazy, careless people who indulge in foolish pastimes, and therefore lose out’ (translation from Oxford Worlds Classics edition of *Aesop’s Fables*, by Laura Gibbs). A different moral appended to this story is ‘don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today’, e.g. Jerry Pinkney (2000) *Aesop’s Fables*. Chronicle Books; cf. Patterson 1991.

within the story, or, for instance, by setting up very clear patterns of cause and effect that seem designed to communicate clear messages about the consequences of moral actions. In the case of the Curtius story, as in the case of many Roman exempla, the plot itself helps us to interpret Curtius' action: the earth closes up again around him, indicating that his self-sacrifice was successful, and the responses of the Roman people, both at the time and subsequently, also direct us to read his act as the right thing to do.

However, even the most directive of moral narratives with apparently very clear and unambiguous messages to convey are more open and complex than they might at first appear, as others have discussed in relation to fables.³⁸ This is inevitable given the capacity of a narrative to exceed any attempt to describe or analyse it, and given the fact that in most contexts an overly simplistic moral message risks coming across as banal and lacking in significance and value as a moral communication.³⁹ As we have seen, Aesopian fables often have their 'moral' stated explicitly, but even this does not necessarily pin down the meaning of a story definitively. A bluntly stated moral is unlikely to exhaust the potential meaning of a narrative; the blunter it is, the less well it is likely to succeed in capturing the nuances of the story. Indeed, it is as likely as anything to function as a provocative spur to further analysis, and sometimes it seems that this is its intention, when it jars obviously with something in the story itself. For instance, the well-known Aesopian fable of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* (number 210 in the Perry index) has a clearly stated message: 'This shows how liars are rewarded: even if they tell the truth, no one believes them.' But this is far from the only moral message that has been drawn from this tale, and to many interpreters over the centuries it has not seemed the best or most obvious interpretation. A recent psychological experiment conducted at McGill university concluded that far from teaching children not to lie by bringing home the dire consequences of doing so, reading this fable actually *increased* the likelihood that children would go on to lie.⁴⁰ Recently readers have interpreted the fable as being more about the boy's need for attention from the wider community, and the necessity for the community to provide him with support so that he doesn't feel the need to fabricate dangers in order to get them to listen to him. And indeed, it is striking that the original fable doesn't explain why the boy is motivated to 'cry wolf'.

³⁸ On the changing meanings of fables, see Allen 2005, Patterson 1991.

³⁹ On narrative excess as a characteristic of exempla in the early modern period, see Lyons 1989: 34.

⁴⁰ Lee, Talwar et al. 2014.

One thing we can say about a fable like *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* is that it is clearly morally charged – it evokes moral anxieties or interest, and it is presented to us as designed to teach us something about morality. Yet its precise message is less clear.

An attempt to pin down the moral significance of a fable to one single meaning is likely to backfire. For instance, in her discussion of the morals of ancient fables Teresa Morgan gives a single interpretation of a fable from Babrius (Perry index 35), about the friendship between a satyr and a human being. The story goes that the satyr rejects his human friend because he believes that he is untrustworthy: he has twice come across the human blowing air, and on each occasion the human being has offered a different, opposing reason for doing so. On the first occasion he explained that he is blowing on his own hands to warm them up, on the second that he is blowing on his food to cool it down. Morgan concludes that the moral communicates the precept that one should break off a friendship if one discovers one's friend is untrustworthy.⁴¹ Perhaps; this is one reasonable 'moral' to draw from the narrative, although it strikes me as far less likely than other morals. In Morgan's interpretation one is required to identify fully with the satyr and his bafflement at the seemingly odd behaviour and contradictory explanation provided by the human, which have made him seem dishonest. However, we readers ancient and modern are (I am going to assume!) all human beings, and we have special insight into the mystifying behaviour of the human. It should be clear to us all that the behaviour of the human being is in fact reasonable – in cold weather blowing on one's hands can indeed warm them up, and hot food can indeed be cooled by blowing on it. It seems likely that the fable expects a reader to bring this human insight to the interpretation of the tale. Any human reader can see that the satyr is misguided: his human friend is not proved to be untrustworthy by his actions, and there is no reason for the satyr to break off the friendship. A very reasonable moral to draw from this fable, if we take the satyr as the moral protagonist, would be quite the opposite of the one that Morgan draws: if one thinks that one's friend is untrustworthy one ought perhaps to give him the benefit of the doubt, since his apparently irrational behaviour may well turn out to have a perfectly rational explanation. Taking the human character as a moral protagonist opens up another line of moral possibility; the story can be taken as a warning about being careful about how one comes across to others. The underlying context and motivations for your behaviour might be clear to you, but they might look

⁴¹ Morgan 2007a: 68.

rather different to another observer who might draw unflattering conclusions about you on the basis of them.

By attempting to draw a single and simple moral from this tale, Morgan has in fact underlined how important it is not to impose a univocal reading. Her own argument about fables is that while literary critics may indulge in the practice of exploring multiple possible interpretations of the tale, 'it would be wrong for a historian . . . to focus on the ambiguity and multivalency of fables . . . at the expense of assessing what they were intended to mean in the early Empire.'⁴² My own approach is absolutely opposed to this distinction between the literary critic and the historian, and I assert that for fables, as for Roman exempla, the meaning was intended to be, in Morgan's term, 'multivalent', for as she asserts elsewhere: 'Like fables, despite their assigned moral, [exempla] nearly always have more than one possible interpretation.'⁴³ This is not because they have a single primary meaning that they have failed to securely pin down; rather, multivalency is an important aspect of their primary moral significance in the first place.⁴⁴

Exempla are indeed, like Aesopian fables and other wisdom narratives, multivalent in the sense of being open to more than one ethical interpretation, but also in terms of being able to convey multiple moral messages at once, and even messages that may be in logical conflict with one another, as we earlier saw in the case of the Bandhula story.⁴⁵ Multivalency is an important feature of Roman exempla that combines with a degree of cultural consensus to endow them with exceptional cultural status and ethical efficacy. This feature describes not only their capacity to be reinterpreted and redeployed in different contexts and to acquire new meanings over time (what we might term 'serial multivalency') but also their

⁴² Morgan's approach is flawed precisely because she makes a distinction between historian and literary scholar as if the complexity of the meaning found in the interpretation of the literary critic was somehow a luxurious and unnecessary addition to the fable, and the 'real' basic meaning was the one that the historian can work with. But her own analysis demonstrates clearly how flawed this methodology is: by attempting to pin down the 'real' meaning of a fable, she shows that the supposed message does not do justice to this fable at all.

⁴³ Morgan 2007a: 127.

⁴⁴ Compare Patterson's discussion of the 'functional ambiguity' of fables: 'the fable's meaning was not fixed but contestable' and it thrived in the early modern period precisely because 'it articulated in symbolic terms some of the most intransigent problems in political philosophy and practice' (Patterson 1991: 39–41). On the contested meanings of Roman exempla as an important feature, see Chapters 12 and 13.

⁴⁵ Usually, I prefer to use the term 'indeterminacy' to describe this feature of moral tales (see Chapter 7), since it does not imply that the many possible meanings are already there, contained within the text or within the story. Thus it allows new significance to emerge over time with changing interpretative contexts.

capacity to generate multiple interpretations within a single reader at a single reading (what we might term ‘simultaneous multivalency’). This is analogous to the capacity of the Buddhist story of Bandhula to allow simultaneous understandings of karma that add up to a complex grasp of the cultural and moral significance of that concept. What I am terming ‘serial multivalency’ has been identified as an important and intriguing feature of Roman exempla, often described as their ‘flexibility’.⁴⁶ It is one of the features that allowed these stories to be so enduring over time. Simultaneous multivalency, however, is the feature that makes Roman exempla so good to think with, and capable of generating such penetrating philosophical insight.⁴⁷ Simultaneous multivalency is what allows Roman exempla to contribute to and encourage what I call the Roman practice of ‘controversial thinking’, which is theorised and discussed in [Chapter 12](#). This feature was key, I shall argue, to their ethical efficacy. At any given time, within particular communities where a story has cultural value, there is a broad interpretative consensus around the significance of the story that gives the story a moral centre of gravity, despite its openness and incorporation of diversity; multivalency constitutes part of this agreed consensus. Indeed, the balance between the directive nature of the exemplum and its openness to being interpreted and applied to particular new cases (i.e. the life and understanding of each moral agent) is what gives it its power.

Exemplary tales were also subject to extended reception over the life course of individual members of Roman society. A story would have a different effect on a person the first time it was encountered (often in childhood), and in every subsequent re-reading or re-encounter, and it would probably be understood differently and applied differently each time. Exempla are what we might call ‘working stories’; as the lifeblood of ethics they are stories that one is expected to return to again and again over the course of one’s life, applying them as appropriate to one’s own moments of crisis or bewilderment. It is not always possible to grasp their significance until the moment is right and they have acquired relevance for one’s own life. Sometimes one may feel one has grasped an exemplum’s significance on one reading only for it to fall away again at the next. With such familiar tales, an individual would keep reflecting on and returning to the same stories and texts as they moved through their lives, finding new

⁴⁶ See [Chapter 7](#) n. 3 for references.

⁴⁷ See Stoneman 2002 on the philosophical complexity of the Alexander exemplum in ancient thought.

significance and relevance every time, as we do with rich cultural products such as great works of literature or cinema. In fact, as we shall see, there is a whole range of functions that can be played by exempla, from the basic cognitive assistance or the emotional lure, to exploration, argumentation, philosophy and persuasion. For exemplary tales can certainly sustain such a level of reinterpretation and reflection, not least by virtue of their simultaneous multivalency. The exemplum carries one to understanding through a combination of the concrete, particular accessibility of example, and an ability to encompass moral complexity that we might call 'literariness'.⁴⁸

Thus, to understand Roman exempla, we need to be sceptical about claims that they are univocal and unambiguous; such claims are often made both in the texts that cite exempla and in the exemplary narratives themselves, and are taken up by modern scholarship.⁴⁹ Like fables, exempla are often presented as being the vehicles for clear messages, and this apparent clarity and pointedness are important factors in their moral potency. However, in the wider context, beyond their citation in particular persuasive texts, in the form of the shared 'sites of exemplarity' theorised, the stories are not fixed in meaning.⁵⁰ When an exemplum is cited for a particular persuasive end, work needs to be done to allow the story to convey the particular meaning that is required; interpretative frames need to be imposed upon the narrative in any particular textual setting. Even within specific directive retellings, exempla defy such framing and remain multivalent and variously appropriate by readers.

One of the strengths of Roman exempla is precisely that, in their own complexity, they are able to communicate the complexity of virtues and other moral ideas, which are inevitably contested and hard to define and pin down. Exempla facilitate the acquisition of moral wisdom in a number of different ways that go beyond the simple illustration and definition of virtues, and these will be outlined over the course of the chapters that follow. Exempla help one to articulate what one values and what is worth striving for in life, and to communicate nuanced moral ideas and a kind of knowledge about morality that cannot be communicated through straightforward description or exposition or formal definition. It is not just that exempla can provide a 'short-cut' to moral knowledge (as Seneca suggests

⁴⁸ Cf. Nussbaum's description of literature as an ethical medium in Nussbaum 1990.

⁴⁹ See also Allen 2005 on this in relation to the interpretation of fables in the middle ages.

⁵⁰ On this, see further in Chapter 7.

in the passage cited at the start of this chapter). For some kinds of moral knowledge, exemplary stories may be the only path available. In short, moral concepts are broad and complex, and, with their narrative, their indeterminacy and their embedded complexity, exempla are able to respect this breadth and complexity, making them an extremely productive moral and educational resource. They help people to reach a ‘working understanding’ of concepts, without needing to reduce them to absolute definitions. Exempla lead one to attain a particular kind of moral wisdom, as this book aims to show.

As a corollary, we need to appreciate the moral seriousness of exempla. Roman exemplarity is both more open than one might suppose to interpretation and initiative from its audience and more profound in its moral purchase. Like the Confucian exempla or the Theravāda tales encountered earlier in this chapter, a Roman exemplum is not an accessory or an ornament to the main argument, but itself constitutive of ethics. These are apparently simple and engaging tales, yet to read them is to participate in ethical practice.⁵¹

One of the further aims of this book is to recapture some of the thrill of Roman exemplary ethics, and a sense of the elastic potential these stories contained to engage intelligent, thoughtful, aspirational people in moral debate, reflection, growth and transformation. Part of my goal is to rekindle some respect for the Roman readers and moral agents who did engage with them: we should not think of them as naïve victims of oppressive and coercive discourse, but as active, interested interpreters of wonderful stories, investigating their significance and applying them to their own lives and moral development. Some readings will be more compliant, others more resistant; almost all will incorporate both compliance and resistance. The [following chapter](#) will explore the idea that compliance and resistance to exemplary tales (as well as a spectrum of responses in between) exist within a single culture. This book attempts to reclaim what Elizabeth Allen in her work on medieval exempla has called the ‘readerly initiative’,⁵² (although ancient Romans did not only encounter exempla through their reading). It attempts to demonstrate the delicate

⁵¹ Cf. Allen 2005: 16 on fables in Middle English literature: ‘The concrete, complex narratives that provide the material for exempla are themselves a site of virtuous judgment. In this sense, an example does not lead to virtuous action; the very experience of exemplary discourse *is itself* a form of moral activity . . . In this sense, exemplary literature formulates a much closer link between moral interpretation and social action than even its own instrumental claims aspire to. Reading examples is itself social action.’

⁵² Allen 2005: 18–22.

ethical work of which exempla – so often taken to be a blunt instrument of moral education – are capable. As I hope to persuade my reader, you do not have to be a philosopher, or well-educated, or even literate, to benefit from the teaching of exempla. Perhaps you do not even need the words to articulate what you have learned from them.

Exploitation, Participation and the Social Function of Exempla

Some of the moral significance of an exemplum may well be accessible to conscious and rational analysis in the ways suggested in the [previous chapter](#) by the use of terms such as ‘interpretation’ and ‘message’. However, the persuasive power of stories can also be insidious, working to shape individuals without their awareness of being shaped. Precisely for this reason those in power sometimes deliberately appropriate traditional stories and story forms as an educational or coercive tool as a means of soft control.¹ In such cases, the ‘consumers’ of stories may be unaware of the extent to which they are absorbing values and narrative patterns which then structure their understanding of the world.² Alternatively, consumers may be highly aware of the fact that conforming to certain narrative patterns and scripts is imperative for advancement, acceptance or survival within their culture. The (supposed) use of Roman exempla as a tool of deliberate social control and ideological indoctrination is an aspect that has seemed distasteful to some Western European observers in recent eras.³ Popular stories are indeed capable of shoring up social hierarchies and acting as a form of social oppression by those in power. They can function by carving out different social roles and expectations for different kinds of people within an established hierarchy, and thereby shaping different aspirations and self-expression for members of a community.⁴ Being part of a community may well mean internalising values and ideologies which

¹ For a distinctive illustration of this, see the discussion of Maoist cultural heroes further on. See also Bakken 2000 on exempla and social control in modern China and Scanlon 1994 on medieval exempla as an instrument of power.

² Examples of the way familiar motifs shape experience and understanding include Diana Taylor’s colonial scenarios (Taylor 2003) and also the slave revolt discussed in R. Stewart 2012.

³ See Mitchell 2004: 11 on the clear pedagogical aim of exempla as ‘anathema to modern aesthetic sensibilities’.

⁴ E.g. in Chinese Confucianism, which has many parallels to Roman exemplary ethics, the roles of women are shaped by stories of chastity of exemplary women, or those of children by tales of filial piety.

seek to restrict the roles and aspirations of some members of that society, and which seek to justify the power held by some members of that society over others.

My contention in this book is that, while we can certainly see exempla used as instruments of hegemony and as reflecting the hierarchies and power structures of Roman culture, once again studies of comparable practices of ethical storytelling from other cultures can help us to see how all members of a diverse and stratified society, such as ancient Rome, can share the same cultural resources and repertoires, engaging with them in different ways depending on position and status. The strength of the Roman exemplary ethics is its ability to serve simultaneously the psychological, cultural and ethical needs of many different kinds of people. It enables resistance and creative engagement as well as compliance.

In one of the most useful discussions to date of the sociological aspects of Roman exempla, Holt Parker has suggested that the exemplary tales that circulated in ancient Rome, featuring loyal wives accompanying their husbands into exile and loyal slaves laying down their lives for their masters, were primarily designed to serve the needs of those husbands and masters, the hegemonic free Roman male. These exempla are ‘stories that Roman men told each other’ and that respond to the ‘specific psychological needs’ of the men in power;⁵ these loyalty tales tend to circulate with special intensity at times of social crisis, and are set in periods of crisis and instability, such as the collapse of the Roman republic and the reigns of ‘the bad emperors, especially Tiberius and Nero’.⁶ Parker writes: ‘*Exempla* represent a form of cultural capital that masters and husbands can use to create social order and reproduce cultural values. By providing a repository of narrative patterns and *topoi*, *exempla* give both writer and reader intellectual control over complex and terrifying events. They are reader-made devices for showing the effects of the breakdown of society, while simultaneously offering an affirmation of its fundamental values. To those in power, to husbands and masters, the exempla offer a way to deal psychologically with conscious and unconscious fears.’⁷ Such stories might look on first reading as if they celebrate the virtue and subjectivity of their protagonists – the admirable men and women who risk and suffer exile, death and pain – but in Parker’s analysis they serve fundamentally to

⁵ Parker 1998: 152. ⁶ Parker 1998: 153.

⁷ Parker 1998: 153. Another compelling study suggesting that Valerius Maximus’ collection of exempla in particular can be seen as a response to the social breakdown of the civil war that preceded the founding of the principate is Lucarelli 2007.

reinscribe the social hegemony which relegates these excellent people to subordinate status. Any autonomy displayed by the protagonists of these tales is deceptive, for they are always ultimately revealed to rely for their status, and for the very meaning of their lives, on the masters on whose behalf they act so courageously. Parker reads these stories as allaying the lurking fears of the hegemonic male about the disruptive potential of the disempowered people who live within his household: '[women and slaves] are capable of the most heinous crimes: betrayal, adultery, murder. To balance the tales of horror, the Romans invented the Tales of Loyalty. In these, slaves and women enact the same *topoi*, show the same desire to prove their loyalty by overcoming their vices, even to the point of death. These tales calm their masters' fears, bring them honor and serve as an ideological weapon. The legends of loyal slaves and loyal wives are a fund of stories that Roman men told each other so they could sleep at night, surrounded by those they most trusted and feared.'⁸

In other words, although these stories feature heroic women and heroic slaves who display great courage and virtue, nevertheless, in Parker's analysis, this body of exempla (especially associated with periods of civil war and the consequent social disruption) are ultimately stories whose narrative logic reinforces the subaltern status of these groups, and whose primary cultural purpose is not that of speaking to the subjectivity of members of those subordinate groups. These stories are not intended to empower slaves and women and encourage their autonomy; any sense that such tales enable slaves and women to share in the virtue and the glory that belongs to free men would be mistaken.

Yet, as Parker shows, these stories work not by entirely suppressing the powerful, heroic humanity of their ultimately subordinated protagonists. Rather they acknowledge this fundamental humanity and the anxieties and problems that it brings to a society that works by denying it. As Parker puts it: 'The masters-husbands-authors demonstrate an awareness of the discordant elements and potential fissures which have always existed in their society's fundamental institutions'⁹, the *familia* and slavery, within which both slaves and wives are 'intimate strangers'.¹⁰

When it comes to the stories of loyal wives, Parker tells us that we should not 'ignore the psychological satisfaction these stories might offer the women in the audience. The Tales of Loyal Wives show brave,

⁸ Parker 1998: 170. Cf. Lobur 2008: 206 describing exempla in general as providing 'comforting' reassurance for Roman leaders that they were acting in conformity with the *mos maiorum*.

⁹ Parker 1998: 153. ¹⁰ Parker 1998: 155.

powerful, autonomous women. They are heroines who have adventures, yet do not lose their “femininity”. They violate accepted gender roles, yet are rewarded with praise. Even noble suicide provides the deep emotional pleasures of courage and pathos.¹¹ He acknowledges, thereby, that there might be those who read these stories who do think in terms of the subjectivity of the women and perhaps slaves as well, and that they might provide within circumscribed parameters of accepted gender roles, room for the disenfranchised to express their own virtue and autonomy. He does not expand on the implication of the assertion that women might have their own way of reading these stories, independent from that of a patriarch. However, once this has been acknowledged, the genie cannot be put back in the bottle. Once such stories flirt with the dangerous concept of autonomy and virtue in slaves and wives, they cannot guarantee that they will always be able to prevent them from taking on a life of their own. Women and slaves might find such stories ‘good to think with’ too, in other ways that do not rely on adopting a hegemonic subjectivity or even perspective. And an alternative reading from the perspective of a slave or woman would not be irrelevant to the dominant cultural purpose of the stories, if we accept Parker’s argument that this is to help the master deal with anxieties about status and social order. These ‘fissures’ and discordant elements within society are likely to have had a much more urgent feel to the slaves and wives who needed to suppress their own human needs and capabilities in order to operate within the Roman social hierarchy. Moreover, social order relies on the cooperation with the hegemony of such subordinated members as women and slaves to an even greater degree than it relies on the allaying of the master’s discomfort. Slaves and women may have an even greater need to find ways of giving meaning to a life, given the denial of their autonomy, and it would be wrong to think of these protagonists as being ‘good to think with’ only for the dominant men.¹² Indeed, when Latin texts deploy exemplary tales they often do so in such a way as to encourage the stories to be read from multiple subject positions, focalising events through different (kinds of) protagonists.¹³

Roman hierarchies and the self-interest of dominant groups are certainly recognised and reflected in Roman exempla – in the structure of the stories, in the fact that the great majority feature magisterial, male, adult Roman protagonists, and in the values enacted and disseminated in the stories:

¹¹ Parker 1998: 169. ¹² Cf. my discussion of exemplary women in Pliny’s letters Langlands 2014.

¹³ On focalisation and perspective, see further Chapters 7 and 13.

effective command, patriotism, military prowess.¹⁴ Scholars have often noted how representations of key historical episodes are aligned with the interests of particular powerful Roman families, and have demonstrated (notably in several essays in the collection *Les Grands Hommes* edited by Coudry and Späth¹⁵) how the traditions surrounding particular exemplary figures (for instance Marcellus, Coriolanus, the Fabii, Camillus) developed under the influence of specific aristocratic interests. Furthermore, the appropriation not only of individual exemplary stories and motifs but of the whole language and structure of exemplarity by the Roman imperial regime from Augustus onwards has been the subject of discussion in scholarship in recent decades;¹⁶ the emperor Augustus himself in his *Res Gestae* announced that part of his legacy was the handing down of traditional exempla and the establishment of new ones.¹⁷ It is undoubtedly the case that powerful moral stories in ancient Rome, as elsewhere, were used to serve the political and ideological interests of the hegemony, whether by the deliberate intention of powerful members of the community to manipulate others or through a more diffuse cultural logic in which all participated, as in Parker's suggestion.¹⁸ These various ways of using the cultural resource of exemplary tales must have constituted important aspects of the cultural practice surrounding exemplarity and exemplary ethics, and their prominence must have had significant impact on participants in Roman culture. Nevertheless, it will be my contention in this book that this kind of political purchase is dependent on a more fundamental co-existing ethical significance which needs to work at a personal level for a range of critical and reflective moral agents. When political interests appropriate traditional moral tales, they are exploiting the potency that comes from the moral charge and associated cultural status; they cannot create this potency on their own terms.¹⁹

¹⁴ We have seen in [Chapter 1](#) how Roman national identity and pride were communicated through exempla, as well as militaristic and masculinist values.

¹⁵ Coudry and Späth 2001.

¹⁶ Walter 2004, Kraus 2005, Langlands 2015b, Gunderson 2015. For more on what imperial appropriation of exemplarity might have done to Roman exemplarity, see further discussion in [Chapter 11](#).

¹⁷ Aug. *RG* 8.5.

¹⁸ In [Chapter 9](#), we will see that the legend of Robin Hood has been subject to similar aristocratic manipulation.

¹⁹ They must draw on established ethical topoi and be rooted in existing scenarios and stories to be effective; see [Chapters 9](#) and [10](#). For similar arguments that aristocratic culture does not operate in isolation from popular culture, see Morstein-Marx 2004: 79: 'This "cult of the ancestors" may well be seen as a source of aristocratic power, authorising the special claims of the nobility to leadership of the Republic; but precisely to that extent, the plebeian mass must have embraced it and joined with the elite in a *common* orientation toward the communal past' and Blom 2010: 13 who argues that

For instance, in the case of Corvinus discussed previously, an important aspect of the commemoration of his heroic deed is the name itself that the hero is said to have won for the Valerii family. Family *cognomina* such as this were one of the most significant ancient ways of preserving and transmitting exemplary stories, with their reference to the impressive heritage of contemporary holders of the name, alongside the great annalistic and historical literature of Rome, and expensive visual monuments such as relief sculptures, free-standing statues and wall-paintings.²⁰ All such media reflect and respond to the power of the Roman elite, and such heroic tales are routinely told as a means of celebrating the contributions of aristocratic families to the Republic and to Roman history. Their association with the great families of Rome (which also does not itself remain stable but shifts and changes over time, depending on who has power over the dominant media, as we shall see) reflects the grip that the powerful members of Roman culture had over these stories.²¹ We have seen that Aulus Gellius – probably drawing on an older tradition – associates this tale with the family of the Valerii Maximi, a name which resonates with contemporary families who might associate themselves with this famous heroism. The name Corvinus would have had particular resonance in the late first century BCE when Livy was writing, because of the prominence of Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus (64 BCE–8 AD), and this might account for Livy's shift from the name 'Corvus' to the variant 'Corvinus' later in his work (at 32.15, 40.3).²² This shifting association with leading families is indicative of the extent to which these stories were shaped by the political agenda of particular powerful members of Roman community. The very names by which the heroes are known change over time in relation to the changing prominence of families and individuals in Rome. The intricacies of this phenomenon have been expertly unravelled by several scholars in recent years, who have explored the traditions surrounding several historical figures.²³

although *maiores* were ancestors of particular families they also belonged to whole Roman people as well.

²⁰ On Roman family names and association with exemplary tales, see Henderson 1997 on Juvenal *Satires* 8.

²¹ See Flower 2014b on some of the contemporary influences shaping the versions of this tale that were circulated in the first century, including the statue in the Augustan forum.

²² Hellegouar'ch (1974). Oakley is sceptical of this explanation (Oakley 1998: 239) but suggests in turn that the historian Valerius Antias, writing in the 40s BCE, may have exaggerated Corvinus' importance in Roman history in order to bring glory to his own family (Oakley 1998: 309, 448).

²³ See in particular Flower 2003 on the figure of Marcellus, David 2001 on Coriolanus, Coudry 2001 and Walter 2004: 382–407 on Camillus.

However, I want to emphasise that such political ends cannot be achieved without the ethical component of these tales, which is more fundamental.²⁴ This ethical value is limited neither by the political ends nor by the moralising or rhetorical ends to which an exemplary tale may also be used again and again. Underneath all this political self-promotion and Roman ideology lies something more simple at the heart of the story – an ethical and cultural significance, which may be used to serve political hegemonic interests, but also functions independently to engage the interest of members of the wider community. It is this that ensures that the stories are perceived by a wider range of members of the community as relevant and significant to them, and not just to those family members for whom the hero is supposed to be an ancestor. This broader moral engagement is what political uses of the story rely upon. Indeed, exempla cannot function as political and ideological promotion except within a framework which acknowledges that their primary value is ethical.

Thus each exemplary story – whatever its political implications are understood to be – taps into a set of moral ideas and narrative motifs that weave it into a capacious tradition of national moral heroism.²⁵ Curtius' tale, as Stephen Oakley notes, is based on the familiar structure, found in many cultures, of the 'substitutionary sacrifice', whereby a natural crisis can only be brought to an end by the sacrifice of a highly valuable member of society.²⁶ In addition, the motifs of 'leaps into pits' and 'plunges on horseback' may be paralleled in several stories.²⁷ Neither is Valerius Corvinus' an isolated story, propagated by a single family, about a glorious ancestor. Rather it belongs to a wider pattern of stories of single combat in the early days of the Republic, which is evident, for instance, in Livy's early books written at the end of the first century BCE, where Corvinus' deed contributes to a recurrent motif.²⁸ As we saw, in Livy's account Corvinus is described as deliberately perpetrating such a pattern by

²⁴ These political contestations over the details and significance of historical deeds of heroism can be understood as having ethical significance too; see [Chapter 12](#).

²⁵ See further in [Chapter 13](#) for a detailed discussion of this process of the interweaving of themes and strategy of juxtaposing different exempla to maximise moral effect.

²⁶ Oakley 1998: 97.

²⁷ See Versnel 1981: 152–156, especially on an annual ritual in Tarracina. Cf. the parallel of Anchourus in Plut. *Par. Min.* 306e–307a, a text which also spells out one moral of Curtius' tale more explicitly than the Latin sources do: while the rest of the Romans are throwing gold and silver into the chasm, Curtius realises that human life (Psyche) is the most valuable thing, and so throws himself into the chasm. This version spells out the comparison between material wealth and the things that really matter, makes his thought process more explicit and doesn't make him a representative of military greatness, but simply a human sacrifice.

²⁸ Oakley 1995; Feldherr 1998: 82–III; Fox 1996; cf. Flower 2014a on the *spolia opima*.

imitating the earlier deed of Torquatus: ‘There was a young military tribune, Marcus Valerius, who thought that he himself was no less worthy of such honour than Titus Manlius, and having first consulted the wishes of the senate, went forth armed into the middle’ (*M. erat Valerius tribunus militum adulescens, qui haud indigniorem eo decore se quam T. Manlium ratus, prius sciscitatus consulis voluntatem, in medium armatus processit*, (7.26.2). If this story of the intrepid hero is indeed often called upon to serve the interests of a particular aristocratic family, it is able to do so because it possesses a far greater cultural resonance as a source of pride and inspiration. My primary interest in this study is in the wider moral significance of these motifs and their contribution to a Roman exemplary ethics that impacted on the moral development of members of Roman society, far beyond – though at times in collaboration with – specific political strategies.

It is certainly the case that Roman exempla were often used to promote the interests of leading families or the imperial household among the Roman people, and to disseminate their ideologies. They were also often used as rhetorical tools, supporting political and philosophical arguments. Such highly instrumental citations of exempla, which serve the needs of an argument or broader ideological or political needs, are important aspects of their multivalent role in Roman culture. However, exempla should not be thought of merely as accessories to argument and ideology; we should not allow the undeniable instrumentality of the exemplum in the rhetorical, political and ideological spheres to obscure its further and related instrumentality in the ethical sphere. All these uses of the exemplum are dependent on the more fundamental role of exempla in Roman ethics, even as they also help to shape, shore up and challenge that role.

A corollary of this is that no matter how authoritarian the context in which they are deployed, exemplary stories can never be merely stifling and oppressive in their moralising, and their admonitions cannot constitute the walls of a prison within which it is impossible to move; they are not just *prescriptive*. To elicit complicity from a moral agent, there needs to be at least an illusion of choice and agency. Even in the most authoritarian contexts (as we shall see later in this chapter), choice, variation and transgression are still always features of exemplarity. In the case of Roman exemplarity, indeed, they are prominent features: the transgression of boundaries and challenges to the status quo are (always) as important as submission to directives. We have seen in [Chapter 1](#) how important obedience and discipline are, but Roman exemplarity also had this capacity for insubordination built-in, as one of the meta-exemplary values and

guiding principles handed down through exempla.²⁹ The capacity to 'break the mould' and step out of line was, as we also see in the cases of Corvinus and Curtius, a prized characteristic of the exemplary hero; those men literally stepped forward out of the ranks of their fearful fellow-Romans, to confront the threat to their community. Mucius deviates from the code of military ethics when he deploys ingenuity and deception in his dealings with Porsenna. The ability to break rules and act unconventionally is similarly shown to be valuable in many ancient exemplary tales: the exemplary figure of Scipio as represented by Valerius Maximus in his chapter on self-confidence (*fiducia sui*, 3.7) embodies this characteristic, and other prominent examples are collected by Valerius Maximus in chapters 3.6 and 3.7 of his work.³⁰

Moreover, due to the special capacity for narrative to embrace indeterminacy and conflicting principles, even the most coercive exempla always also offer means of resistance to their own coercion, not least by mapping out and making explicit what needs to be sacrificed in order to conform or to maintain the status quo. We saw this in the Buddhist tale about Bandhula and the workings of karma discussed in the [previous chapter](#), where acceptance of karma means surrendering the right to righteous outrage about the treatment of the innocent. In the Roman context too, the stories of Mucius, Curtius and Corvinus involve the hero's self-sacrifice at a level from which the ordinary Roman might shrink, and Roman exemplary tales are often designed to elicit a frisson of horror at the extremes of suffering that are required of a hero.³¹

In the absence of access to minds and practices of ancient Romans, and especially to non-elite experience and non-literary sources, this chapter uses analyses of comparative material from more recent cultures to help create a framework for understanding how Roman exempla might have worked as an ethical resource within and across Roman culture. One illuminating modern comparison to the situation in ancient Rome is that of Maoist China, a case of an authoritarian political system which, from the first, recognised the power of traditional exemplary heroic tales and sought to harness them as a means of social control.³² As Mary Sheridan, writing in

²⁹ As J.-M. David noted in his discussion of classical and medieval exempla back in 1980 (David 1980; cf. David 1993). See discussion of creative imitation in [Chapters 4](#) and [5](#). Cf. the revolutionary zeal and individualism which is a recurrent feature of Maoist communist heroes. Cf. the concepts in modern philosophy of 'exemplary originality' (Lloyd 1995: 266) or 'revolutionary exemplarity' (Warnick 2008: 116).

³⁰ These are discussed in Langlands 2011. ³¹ See further [Chapter 4](#).

³² Wang 1997. Wang describes the double-edged nature of the aesthetic in Communist China which can both liberate and oppress. Cf. Sheridan 1968, Bakken 2000, Cheng 2009 for more on the

1968, described it, Mao's cultural revolution 'is perhaps the most extensive effort in history to transform a nation by changing the character of its people'.³³ From 1963, the People's Liberation Army in China employed mass dissemination of stories of a range of real-life, contemporary Maoist heroes (through organised campaigns including films, published diaries, songs and stories) as a deliberate strategy for disseminating Maoist ideology, and moulding the behaviour of the people through inspiring them to emulation of these figures.³⁴ This is an instance from recent history where the coercive role of the state is clear and explicit, and the genesis and dissemination of the heroic tales can be traced with comparative ease. Two aspects of the phenomenon are especially pertinent to my arguments about Roman exempla. First, these new heroic tales serving a new political and cultural order did not in fact emerge from nowhere, but were rooted in long-standing Chinese ethical practices and story traditions, even as the regime sharply differentiated itself from such traditional values.³⁵ Second, as avowedly directive as these stories of Maoist exemplary heroes are, they nevertheless incorporate the subversive elements that are also present in Roman exempla and that, I argue, are fundamental for enabling them to gain traction among the population.

Like Augustus' appropriation of Roman exemplary discourse, the Maoist exemplary ethical programme drew on an existing tradition of exemplary ethics. Although the Maoist hero campaigns were a new departure, the exemplary mode itself was familiar from the traditional Confucian education where people were expected to learn by emulating national heroes, by reading, for example, the well-known stories of filial piety.³⁶ Although the Maoist heroes were new and modern and represented a break with this long-standing ethical tradition of Confucianism, and their tales were disseminated through the medium of journals written in the first person as well as newspaper articles, films and songs, nevertheless their tales were moulded by a re-deployment of the heroic motifs and topoi of the traditional Confucian

deployment of exemplars and role models in modern China as social control and their dynamic roles in Chinese society.

³³ Sheridan 1968: 47. ³⁴ For details of these campaigns of 1963–1966, see Sheridan 1968: 50–65.

³⁵ Sheridan 1968: 47, Roberts 2014.

³⁶ I thank Henry Lee and Ed Skidelsky, both of whom have suggested to me that there might be interesting parallels between Chinese and ancient Roman cultural practices when it came to exempla. Cf. Roberts 2014: 29 'In traditional society, one of the ways in which the concept of filial piety was imbued into children was through the study of ideal behavioural models, the most famous of which were the 24 models (or paragons) of filial piety (二十四孝) dating from the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368 A.D.). The Yuan collection was in widespread popular use as an educational tool for children and modified versions continue to be used to the present day.' See also Jordan 1986 on these models and the values they promulgate.

tales.³⁷ Both the traditional tales of filial piety and the new Maoist heroes also bear specific similarities with Roman exemplary tales and heroes: the isolation, the brutality, the physical courage and endurance and the subjugation of the individual to the greater good of the community. 'A recurring theme of the twenty four models is that of children consciously allowing physical deprivation and injury to themselves in their enactment of filial piety. The child Wu Meng who bared his body to mosquitoes at night to keep them off his parents (Model 11) is one example. Another child, Wang Xiang, Model 12, lay naked on a frozen river in an attempt to melt the ice in order to catch fish to make soup for his sick stepmother.'³⁸ The behaviour of Model 8, Jiang Ge, who carried his aged, widowed mother on his back to escape turmoil in their home area, is reminiscent of that of Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*, in the famous scene, much imitated in visual arts, of his carrying his father Anchises on his back away from the flaming ruins of their home city Troy (Virg. *Aen.* 2.707–708). The Roman exemplum of filial piety in which a woman keeps her mother alive in prison by nourishing her with her own breast (Val. Max. 5.4.7) bears a striking resemblance to one of the few exempla of the Twenty Four to feature a female protagonist, Model 10, where Lady Tang, realising that her mother-in-law had no teeth and was becoming malnourished, fed her from her own breast every day (Roberts 2014: 29). Meanwhile the heroic martyrdom of the PLA heroes also resonates with that of Roman exemplary heroes, especially those acting in the military context. Wang Chieh died in July 1965 because he threw his body on top of a defective mine in order to save the lives of his students. The disregard for the pain of a burning hand is a motif found in the stories of both Wang Chieh and Ouyang Hai, for instance, and is reminiscent of the heroism of Mucius Scaevola.³⁹ Whether these similarities arose from direct contact between these two story traditions at some point in their histories, they certainly reflect similar strict ethical commitment to the individual's suffering and sacrifice for the greater good of the community.

The Maoist exemplary heroes and their stories were deliberately created and disseminated by the PLA to shape Chinese people into good Maoists,

³⁷ See Roberts 2014, with particular focus on the way that the Maoist hero Lei Feng's story relates to one of the core concepts underpinning Confucian thought: *xiao*, or filial piety.

³⁸ Roberts 2014: 30.

³⁹ See also the examples cited by Roberts 2014: 25, n. 5: 'Dong Cunrui was a young hero of the civil war who blew himself up to destroy an enemy bunker that was blocking a bridge entrance. His model status was promoted through the 1955 film *Dong Cunrui* (董存瑞) from the Changchun film studio directed by Guo Wei . . . ' This example is reminiscent of the tale of Horatius Codes on the bridge.

prioritising loyalty to the state and to their leader. They are about as authoritarian and directed in their cultural purpose as an exemplary hero or tale could be; nevertheless, the exemplary stories incorporate elements that encourage critical and engaged ‘reading’ from their targets, such as conflicting values, insoluble issues and troubling elements. The heroic tales disseminated by the PLA are capable of being as ethically challenging as moral tales taken from other less overtly authoritarian cultures (such as the Bandhula story discussed in the [previous chapter](#)), and incorporate similar celebration of indeterminacy. Teaching the subordination of one’s own needs to the cause is one of the main aims of these stories, yet it turns out that this is not a straightforward thing to teach. In one story, the hero Wang Chieh has not been chosen for the squad of six men who are to work in the river on a freezing winter’s night, because he is not considered strong enough to stand the conditions; determined to draw the attention of the squad leader to his qualities and to steel himself for such a task he strips off his coat and throws himself into the icy water. As Sheridan comments: ‘What is so amazing about this episode . . . is that it could be held up as praise-worthy at all. Here the hero is risking disorder in the squad for the sake of steeling *himself*.’⁴⁰ The individualistic desire of the hero to be an outstanding member of the team outweighs the real needs of the team itself, and this uncomfortable tension between individual and community is a recurrent motif in the Maoist material, just as it is in the archetypal Roman material we have examined in [Chapter 1](#). For instance, the hero Lei Feng writes in his journal the paradoxical line: ‘It is glorious to be a nameless hero’, and Sheridan comments: ‘in theory, a proletarian hero has an “innate” sense of modesty which protects him from expressing individualism in his acts of heroism. In practice however, the contradiction is not so easy to solve, and it continues to pose a problem of presentation and character definition in the propagandists.’⁴¹ Lei Feng is ‘ordinary but great’ (Roberts [2014](#): 25). This is similar to the archetypal tension manifested in the tales of Curtius and Corvinus – Corvinus is the man who acts *intrepide modeste* ‘fearlessly and modestly’, who steps forward to take up the role of hero, pushing himself in front of his peers. Similarly, just as in the case of Roman exempla, and despite the emphasis on conformity and obedience, the motif of heroes disregarding orders is found repeatedly. As Sheridan puts it, a common feature of the Maoist hero stories is ‘The hero breaks the rules and laughs!’ and she comments: ‘This seems

⁴⁰ Sheridan [1968](#): 56. ⁴¹ Sheridan [1968](#): 56.

like a dangerous doctrine to place before young people, but it features repeatedly in all the hero stories.⁴²

If we take Maoist China as an instance where we can be sure that exempla are deliberately deployed to highly coercive ends, as a clear case of an attempt by a powerful political regime to mould the ideology and behaviour of members of society, and to inculcate conformity to a very particular set of ideologies, we can see that *even in this case* the exempla do not require the model respondents to be unquestioning followers of the heroes, and to give up their own individuality and agency and imitate the behaviour of the heroes without thinking for themselves. That is not the kind of communist that this heroic ethics is designed to mould, and this is not how the stories were read, even by the most compliant readers. To be effective, to draw participants willingly into its ideologies and affect behaviour as desired (especially inspiring willingness to suffer pain and deprivation for the good of the state), such an exemplary ethics needs to work through co-option, not oppression. So, it is not just that it is possible to read a coercive exemplarity with resistance and rebellion, and to take away from it moral and ideological messages other than those that were intended by those who generate it. (Though that possibility is always live; one can imagine creative dissidents reading against the grain in all cultures where exemplary stories are in operation and the stronger, more univocal and more top-down the ideology, the clearer cut the dissidence.) Rather, I am arguing something more than this. For the heroic exempla to work at all, to appeal to moral agents and persuade them that Maoist heroics is something they should aspire to, exempla need to already incorporate resistance into their primary message, and to be ‘simultaneously multi-valent’ in the terms we have encountered in the [previous chapter](#). The ideal consumer, too, who responds so perfectly by becoming a Maoist hero himself or herself, must always read with a degree of resistance – the story itself encourages it. Although a specific Maoist ideology frames these stories and directs their interpretation, it cannot restrict the meaning of these stories, whose potential meaning also spills out beyond this particular frame so that the stories can be reappropriated for new contexts and ideologies. The longevity of the hero Lei Fung as exemplum beyond the Maoist project is a useful illustration of this potential realised.⁴³

⁴² Sheridan 1968: 58. We may note however that Roman stories are rarely fun or humorous.

⁴³ Roberts 2014: 25: ‘Lei Feng is a fascinating figure, because he is the socialist model and icon who is most representative of Maoist politics and Maoist social ideals, yet despite the discrediting and dismantling of the Maoist project, he has been revived as a model for emulation several times,

The comparison between the Maoist hero campaigns and Roman exempla is helpful because it enables us to nuance our understanding of what it means for a heroic tale to be coercive in this way. Paradoxically, in order to be effective as a means of control, even the most coercive stories, which are deliberately serving the interests of political power, must also contain a level of openness, flexibility and multivalency that can be used to undermine their very coerciveness. Even the most overtly directive of heroic tales, such as these ones from Maoist China, are not monovocal or without their ambiguities and tensions. Exemplary stories persuade not like a thug who demands with menaces and offers no choice, but rather like an eloquent friend who makes their way seem the most inviting. To be effective, a moral narrative cannot simply *tell* readers what to think; it needs to facilitate a journey towards understanding in which readers feel they are playing an active and intelligent role, and finding their own place within a culture that allows for some diversity and for expanding the repertoire. Even those stories that have a clear moral that they are aiming to communicate, are – if they are to function successfully and capture the imagination of the target audience – more complex and open to interpretation than they might at first seem. For one of the features that make a narrative most persuasive and powerful – the quality of being engaging and invitational – is also the feature that renders the moral of the story somewhat elusive and difficult to pin down. It is a delicate balancing act; to engage, a story should require the reader or listener to do interpretative work, but once the work of interpretation begins one cannot guarantee where it will end. Moreover, the extent to which a story is troubling and the moral is elusive has a bearing on its enduring cultural success.

Even when stories are generated to perform a very specific and directed cultural purpose, and members of the culture know they must be taken seriously, they can still be interpreted and applied in a variety of ways by those who consume them. Thus exempla – even as they are used as a tool of social control – are simultaneously (and subsequently) capable of providing a means of transcending the limitations posed by entrenched social and political hierarchies.⁴⁴ We have seen in the [previous chapter](#) that when it

including major national campaigns in 1985, 1989, 1990, 1993, 2003 and 2012 and mini campaigns now run annually on Lei Feng Day every March 5.'

⁴⁴ There is a useful comparison to be made with Patterson's discussion of fables in the early modern period, where the same fable of the Belly and the Members (originally found in antiquity) was used at the same time to express the ideas of opposing political parties (Patterson 1991).

comes to exempla and other forms of moral tale it is not necessary to privilege one kind of reading over another; the value of exempla is precisely their multivalency and their multifunctionality, their ability to encompass 'heterogeneity of judgment'.⁴⁵ When it comes to Roman exemplarity, just as in the case of the Maoist heroes, coercion and transgression go hand in hand, and this embedded multivalency will be important for our discussion of the ethical function of exempla and the process of creative imitation by which they guide behaviour, discussed in the [following chapter](#).

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There is certainly room for very doctrinaire readings of exempla, which view them as hammering home simple ethical messages to ensure cultural conformity among members of the community. However, on their own such readings do not provide an adequate model for understanding the workings of exemplary ethics. If we are to reach a satisfactory understanding of how exempla worked within Roman culture, we need also to appreciate that exempla can invite critical, questioning readings, and can promote the autonomy and independence of the individual moral agent. Here again consideration of comparative material, this time from Thai Buddhism, can enhance our understanding of how exempla functioned in Roman culture in the absence of direct evidence from antiquity. In his book *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*, Justin McDaniel studies the various ways that practitioners of Buddhism in modern Thailand mobilise the traditional story of the nineteenth-century monk Somdet To. He writes of the members of the Thai Buddhist community who participate in the ritual practices associated with this legend: 'We might assume that the followers of a nineteenth century magician or believers in a vengeful ghost are members of an all-embracing, mind-numbing cult who would wake up from their practices if they were exposed to a good liberal arts education. However, this ignores the complexity and pervasiveness of practice, material culture and texts connected with Somdet To' (McDaniel 2011: 11). McDaniel's characterisation of the easy assumptions that one might make about the ignorance and powerlessness of those who 'follow' cult practice is similar to assumptions that are made by scholars about the imitation of Roman exempla as a mindless following of prescriptive injunctions; we can use his arguments to counter these assumptions too.

Instead of seeing members of the Thai Buddhist community in terms of the exploiters and the exploited, McDaniel re-envisioning them as a diverse

⁴⁵ See e.g. Patterson 1991 on 'functional ambiguity' and Scanlon 1994.

group of people who are all participating in different ways in engaging with the same cultural resource. He seeks to recognise and respect the agency of those who participate in cult practice. Calling those who engage in such ritual practices by the empowering terms of ‘practitioners and purveyors’, he concludes: ‘They are not controlled by the repertoire of icons and tropes. They do not simply blindly follow saints, ghosts, and deities. In my interviews and reading, I found that these practitioners and purveyors of religion often question history, wonder about the veracity of stories, question the value of protective magic, are skeptical about the value of sacred objects, embrace new technology, consciously trade in rumors, take on social causes, read newspapers, go to work, and lead relatively normal lives.’⁴⁶ The great diversity of approaches which also incorporates a critical perspective is possible because independent Buddhist agents work with an agreed and evolving religious repertoire which all members of the diverse community share. Such a framework, I believe, offers an illuminating parallel with Roman exempla. Roman exempla similarly form a common and ever-changing cultural resource that can be accessed and deployed variously by different members of the community.⁴⁷ Those Romans who use exempla to shape and guide their own behaviour need not be uncritical and unthinking; there is plenty of space within Roman exemplary ethics for critical thinking and resistance, indeed these qualities are encouraged. Roman exempla are not merely prescriptive, they allow for a critical perspective, they are shared across all levels of society, and they can be used in different ways by different people.⁴⁸

The aim of McDaniel’s study is to transcend the need to see the Thai Buddhist materials and practices as *either* top-down *or* subversive. Instead, his study develops a useful model for a more holistic and nuanced approach to understanding the way that cultural practices help one to live day to day within cultures where such confrontational impulses and their disruptive potentialities are in operation, and can in fact negotiate and accommodate them: ‘[I]nstead of looking at these sites as simply reinforcing elite political agendas or articulating ideologies of resistance, I show how they reflect “everyday practices of relatedness” as well as difference and discomfort.’⁴⁹ Similarly, as well as understanding how Roman exempla work as a top-down medium, we need also to make space in our analysis for the exploration of the participant experience from a variety of different positions.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ McDaniel 2011: 10. ⁴⁷ On this, see further Chapter 6 on the ‘working consensus’.

⁴⁸ See further Chapters 5–7. ⁴⁹ McDaniel 2011: 10.

⁵⁰ Compare Elizabeth Allen’s critique of Scanlon’s view of exempla as an instrument of power (Allen 2005: 11 on Scanlon 1994).

What does it feel like to participate in Roman exemplary ethics? We must also think in terms of the dynamics of conformity to top-down pressure, resistance to that pressure, creative adaptation of material to the particular demands of different members of society, and the enthusiastic peer-to-peer dissemination of values and ideas.⁵¹ Such attention to participants in the cultural practice of exemplary ethics, as moral agents and engaged members of the community, is a distinctive feature of my own analysis of Roman exempla and exemplarity that sets it apart from that of other scholars in the field.⁵²

In Roman exemplary ethics, I argue, we find a widely shared cultural repertoire of stories and structures with which different members of a diverse and changing society could and did engage from different angles, finding ways of making it relevant to themselves. Given the nature of the evidence available to us from ancient Rome, it is very difficult to find anything that attests directly to much of this engagement, which is inevitably ephemeral and leaves little or no trace in a written or material record. However, a comparison with the role of narratives and exemplars in *contemporary* modern religious practices, such as Christian ethics in the US, Thai Buddhism, or Theravāda Buddhism, can allow us to appreciate how it might have operated.⁵³ The scholars who study these contemporary ethical cultures have access to evidence from a wide range of sources – oral as well as literary, popular as well as scholarly, ephemeral as well as monumental – and they are able to explore how these various media all contribute in different ways towards a coherent ethics; they are able to observe first hand the dynamics of such intermediality in action. Scholars working in these areas are able to investigate (not least through interviewing them directly) how members of a community from different social classes, and with different roles within the community, participate (variously) in a single exemplary ethics.⁵⁴ Their studies show how stories and ethical ideas can be shared across a diverse community and through a wide

⁵¹ Sheridan 1968 discusses how Maoist propagandists need to continually refine and change their hero campaigns in the light of responses from the people.

⁵² In contrast to scholars such as Roller and Hölkeskamp, who tend to approach exempla from the viewpoint of those who deploy them rather than those who make use of them, and to adhere to a more polarised model of exemplarity, corresponding to what McDaniel terms ‘exploiters and exploited’ rather than ‘purveyors and participants’.

⁵³ As studied respectively by Zagzebski 2010, McDaniel 2011, Hallisey and Hansen 1996.

⁵⁴ McDaniel 2011 interviews his subjects about their response to moral stories; G. Obeyesekere 1991 is able to bring his own experience of growing up within a Buddhist culture to bear on his analysis of Theravāda stories; Zagzebski 2010 draws on the experience of contemporary Christians in her theorisation of exemplarist ethics (see Chapter 6).

range of media and in a wide range of contexts, and how stories that form a cultural repertoire can have many different kinds of cultural purchase within a single culture. The versions of exemplary ethics that are the subjects of these studies can be demonstrated to have a wide participatory base and multifaceted cultural purchase.⁵⁵ From them it is possible to extrapolate a model which can be applied to ancient Rome of how exemplary ethics might function as a multifaceted whole across all tiers of a culture, where popular and elite cultures overlap and intersect.

Such scholarship on contemporary ethics brings our awareness to the voices of participants that we usually do not hear in the literature that survives from the ancient Roman world, but which at the time were an important feature of the ethical landscape. It provides us with a useful model for thinking about how a much wider group of cultural participants than we usually have access to might have participated in and contributed to exemplary ethics in ancient Rome. This model allows us to read the largely elite-authored literature that survives in the light of the wider and more diverse culture with which it engages and which must have been a crucial formative context for that literature. Using a model of a coherent and widely shared exemplary ethics derived from a study of this scholarship in the fields of contemporary religion and ethics, then, this book aims to keep open the possibility of a Roman exemplary ethics that extended far beyond the remnants of Latin literature and material evidence that are in our possession today. It aims to listen out for references within Latin literature to aspects of that wider culture that is not directly available to us, including the experiences of the relatively disenfranchised and the personal everyday practices of everyone by which exemplary ethics is sustained but which leave only faint traces in the surviving literature.

Roman exemplary ethics and its repertoire of exemplary tales developed over centuries; they were not cultural resources that any political power, even a Roman emperor, could fully take control of. The longer exempla were in circulation (in all kinds of media, including the textual and the oral), the greater the variety of cultural forces by which they were shaped. Typically, when we find exempla cited within works of ancient literature they bear the marks of a range of political and social interests, intertwined with the ethical interests that are at their core. The ancient literature conveys a sense that there are a variety of forces at work in shaping and sharing of exempla. While at particular moments the elite may well take the

⁵⁵ Hallisey and Hansen 1996, McDaniel 2011, also Hinchman and Hinchman 1997.

initiative, and while the wealthy and powerful often have control of the production of the more costly and lasting media of exempla such as statues, literary texts, and sculptural reliefs, storytelling in oral form is free, both in the sense that it costs nothing and in the sense that it is hard to police,⁵⁶ and it leaves no trace.

⁵⁶ See e.g. Tacitus *Histories* 3.54, where the more Vitellius attempts to suppress stories about what is going on in the war, the more they abound, with Langlands 2018 on this passage.

The Experience of Learning from Exempla

This chapter explores what the Roman sources can tell us about the experience of exemplary ethics for members of Roman community – for the ‘participants’ in exemplary ethics, in McDaniel’s terms. It will begin by outlining the framework within which a moral agent or learner engages with exempla in moral learning and implements this learning in the modification of their own behaviour. It will go on to highlight the importance within Roman exemplary ethics of creative imitation and of critical thinking, and, together with the [following chapter](#), will explore the roles of multiplicity, variety and situational sensitivity in facilitating these. The model of exemplary ethics articulated here is also informed by contemporary philosophy and I will explain briefly how it relates to philosophical debates about moral learning and examples, as well as situating Roman exemplary ethics historically within the long tradition of Western philosophy, particularly in relation to Aristotle’s ethical thought.

For the most part, the process of learning from ethical exempla is not explicitly theorised in ancient Roman writings (with the exception of some of Seneca’s letters to Lucilius, which will be discussed). Nevertheless, it has been possible to extrapolate from the surviving Roman sources, through an examination of their deployment and representation of exempla, and their commentary upon them. I present a schema of the key aspects of the process of learning from an exemplum, each of which is then elaborated in the rest of the chapter.

- 1) **Admiration and wonder:** The exemplary person or act evokes admiration, awe and amazement in the learner.¹

¹ Key Latin vocabulary associated with this includes *mirari*, *admiratio* and *attonitus*, and in the Greek *thauma*; for the close association between *exempla* and *paradoxa*, see Section 1 in this chapter. Cf. Guerrini 1981: 89 n. 30 on what he calls the ‘metalinguistic language’ associated with exempla; he lists the terms *specimen*, *imago*, *miror*, *mirus*, *admirabilis*, *mirificus*, *admiratio*, *veneratio*, *spectandus*, *caelestis* and also the terms associated with horror: *horror*, *atrox*, *horridus*, *tristis*, *trux*, *vaesanus*, *saevus*, *tragicus*.

- 2) Comparison: The exemplum provokes learners to compare themselves to the hero and to wonder whether they would be capable of achieving what the hero has done.
- 3) *Aemulatio*: The exemplum sparks a sense of rivalry with the exemplary protagonist, which incorporates emotional pain and desire, a mixture of negative and positive motivation. There is a sense of anxiety that the learner may not possess the same capacities as the exemplum; yet at the same time the exemplum inspires and promotes aspirations in the learner to possess and develop the same excellent qualities that are displayed by the protagonist.

It is perfectly possible to go through the first two stages of admiration of the exemplary figure and comparison with oneself without feeling in the least inspired and motivated to change one's own behaviour. One might, for instance, reject the comparison or feel that the example is not relevant to one's own life and situation. It must regularly be the case that modern readers read about Mucius burning his own hand and appreciate the admirable qualities that enabled him to do this, but feel unable to conceive of a situation in which they would feel called upon to do something similar.² So the emotional impact of stage 3, where the carrot and stick of inspiration and anxiety are evoked as *aemulatio*,³ is a really important part of the process by which Roman exempla come to have an effect upon a moral learner. It is these that draw a learner into the exemplary process, but Roman sources emphasise that not all participants will respond positively to this, and also how difficult it can be to pass beyond this stage to the implementation of moral learning in one's own behaviour.

In addition to promoting basic self-reflection and igniting aspiration, exempla then have further practical and epistemological functions that they can play in the next stages of the process of moral learning:

- 4) Modeling: The exemplary persons and their actions offer templates for imitation for those who would reach the same level of moral excellence, demonstrating how one can be or act in order to be virtuous; they model virtue and virtuous behaviour.
- 5) Cognition: The process of learning and emulation is not merely a case of learners 'going through the motions' of virtue that they have observed in the exemplum, and imitating the actions

² Compare possible modern responses to the case of Aron Ralston, discussed in [Chapter 1](#).

³ On this complex of motivational emotions as *aemulatio* and its correspondence with the Aristotelian *zelosis* (e.g. Arist. *Rhet.* 2.11.1–4), see Langlands [forthcoming](#), and further Kristjansson 2006 on Aristotle's *zelosis*; such *aemulatio* is associated with a sense of competition and rivalry which balances precariously between inspirational and destructive (cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 4.8).

alone.⁴ There is also a strong cognitive and epistemological element to the process. Exempla can offer epistemological aid, by helping to communicate what a particular moral quality or virtue is. They can facilitate the learner's understanding of the nature of specific virtues such as courage, loyalty and so on, as well as of virtue and vice more broadly.

- 6) Discernment: Exempla also facilitate the grasp of more advanced ethical issues and of meta-exemplary structures and principles, as well as honing the learner's skills of ethical discrimination, discernment and judgment, that is to say, the faculties that are needed to apply general moral principles and ideas to particular situations.⁵

I Admiratio and Wonder

The effect of an exemplum upon the viewer, listener or reader can be thrilling and transformative, and in the first 'arousal' stage, the response that it triggers combines the emotional with the rational.⁶ The affective element of admiration is part of the desired effect of the exemplum. This 'wonder' constitutes not merely a passive appreciation of excellence, but rather something more powerful and visceral. A really effective exemplum should evoke a frisson that is a potent combination of admiration, horror and amazement. This constitutes an important aspect of the process by which the exemplum engages the learner and triggers moral learning. Being affected in this way with horror and awe is itself transformative. The language of wonder is very often used of exempla in the ancient Roman texts, with terms such as *admiratio*, *miraculum*, *prodigium* and *monstrum* used widely in relation to exempla. For instance, the historian Florus introduces the trio of exempla, Horatius Cocles, Mucius Scaevola and Cloelia, by calling them prodigies and miracles that seem like fiction: 'Three prodigies and miracles of Roman name, Horatius, Mucius and Cloelia, which would seem nowadays to be fictions if they were not found in the history books', *tria Romani nominis prodigia atque miracula, Horatius, Mucius, Cloelia, qui nisi in annalibus forent, hodie fabulae*

⁴ What Blondell 2002: 102 calls 'slavish imitation', Roller has called 'structural imitation' as opposed to 'categorical imitation' (Roller 2004: 24–30).

⁵ Writing about the role of examples more generally in moral reason, Kant describes examples as 'go-carts of judgment' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 134), whose role is to hone moral judgment, that is to say, the skill of applying general moral rules to particular situations. On this, see also Loudon 1992, 1998; Gelley 1995: 8; McDowell 1998, Lowrie and Lüdemann 2015.

⁶ For the process of exemplary emulation as an exciting but uncomfortable arousal similar to sexual arousal, see Langlands forthcoming, on the shared vocabulary of *stimulus*, *ardor*, *flagrare*, *excitare*.

viderentur (Florus 1.4.8).⁷ Later, with the exclamation *immane dictum!* ('terrifying to say!') Florus imbues his description of the responses of Mucius and Porsenna to Mucius' hand-burning with the frisson of the uncanny and monstrous (Florus 1.4.8). In Valerius Maximus' account, Mucius demonstrates his contempt for pain with 'amazing endurance' (*mira patientia*).

The wondrous element of an exemplum, then, can act as an aesthetic hook by which the learner is struck, delighted, thrilled, intrigued and thereby first engaged in the learning process. It also has an important role to play in communicating the meta-exemplary ethical message of the exemplum, by establishing the role of *usefulness* of virtue. Roman exempla do not merely present admirable and awe-inspiring qualities, they also show why these qualities are worthwhile pursuing. They do this by demonstrating the effect that they have when put into practice, and showing that the qualities are endorsed by the community generally and that practicing such qualities will earn rewards – almost always consisting of fame and immortality. This function of exempla contributes to establishing the value of moral excellence that is independent of and transcends individual instances of virtue, and to providing the wider framework that gives significance to exemplary deeds.⁸

To this end admiration is often incorporated and modeled in the plot of exempla, communicating meta-exemplary guidance. In Mucius' exemplum, for instance, an important element of the plot is the response of Porsenna to Mucius' deed, which encapsulates and represents this reaction within the plot of the exemplum. Porsenna is horrified by the sight and the smell of Mucius' self-mutilation, and in many accounts of the story he pulls Mucius away from the flames himself, unable to stand even to be a spectator of such a deed. In Florus' account, Porsenna's terror serves to highlight the cool stance of Mucius: '[Mucius] remained unafraid, but the other was terrified as if it were the king's hand that was burning' (*hic interritus, ille trepidaret tamquam manus regis arderet*, Florus 1.4.8).⁹ Martial describes this moment when Porsenna cracks:

When it was seeking the king, and had been misled by a bodyguard
His right hand inserted itself into the sacred hearth to perish.

⁷ Cf. *monstris* a little later in the same passage.

⁸ Cf. Kristjánsson 2016 on Aristotelian virtue education, which identifies this as an important aspect of moral education.

⁹ This aspect of the story appears at Livy 2.12; Martial *Ep.* 1.21, Sen. *Ep.* 66, Florus 1.4.8: Mucius is unmoved as he burns his hand and it is Porsenna who is affected by the burning of the hand as if it were his own.

But the pious enemy could not stand such a savage miracle,
 And he ordered the man to be snatched away from the flames.
 The hand that Mucius was able to burn, holding the fire in contempt,
 That hand Porsenna could not bear to watch.
 The fame and glory of the deceived right hand are greater;
 If he had not made that mistake, he would have done a lesser deed.

cum peteret regem, decepta satellite dextra
 ingessit sacris se peritura focis.
 sed tam saeva pius miracula non tulit hostis
 et raptum flammis iussit abire virum:
 urere quam potuit contempto Mucius igne,
 hanc spectare manum Porsena non potuit.
 maior deceptae fama est et gloria dextrae:
 si non errasset, fecerat illa minus

5

(Mart. *Ep.* 1.21).

In Mucius' story, the miraculous nature of the deed is transformative at the level of the plot, as well. Valerius Maximus describes Porsenna's desire for revenge as transformed into admiration: 'He drove Porsenna himself, forgetting his own danger, to transform his thoughts of revenge into admiration' (*ipsum quoque Porsenam, oblitum periculi sui ultionem suam vertere in admirationem coegit*, Val. Max. 3.3.1). Furthermore, in this and many other versions of the story Mucius' deed is miraculous in transforming Porsenna's attitude and the relationship between Rome and her enemies, bringing about truce between the Romans and the Etruscans. Just as a clever military strategy works a kind of magic that can achieve things that cannot be achieved by brute force alone (as Wheeler puts it¹⁰), so the wondrous exemplary act has a miraculous and transformative effect that drives the plot of the exemplum.

In demonstrating the tangible effect that virtue can have on the real world around one, the 'miracle effect' also, importantly, can serve to communicate the very point of virtue, and thus is also motivational in its own way. Virtue is not enacted merely for its own sake here, rather it is useful and has real consequences; this instrumental function of virtue for the greater good is often an important feature of Roman exempla.¹¹ Here Mucius' deed has the effect of winning Porsenna's admiration and saving Rome in its hour of need.¹²

¹⁰ Wheeler 2010: 18. Wheeler suggests that in the context of military strategy paradoxical things can work because they 'yield surprise and deception'.

¹¹ Although it can be in tension with a Stoic-influenced perspective that views these exemplary deeds as motivated by virtue for its own sake, as in Cic. *Fin.* 2, discussed at the start of Chapter 12, see also the discussion of motivation and Senecan philosophy in Chapter 7.

¹² In some texts, Porsenna's motivation is described as admiration for Roman virtue (e.g. Plut. *Pop.* 17) and in others as fear (e.g. Florus 1.4.8: *et rex quidem tot tantisque virtutem territus monstis valere*

These characteristics of the miraculous and the extraordinary, however, also bring exempla close to another ancient genre, paradoxography, with which they also share both a desire to shock and a tension generated by the need to be at once plausible and yet ‘unbelievable’. These shocking and often highly visual elements of exempla (such as Mucius’ burning hand) contribute to the memorability of exemplary tales,¹³ but more importantly they tap into an established use of paradox to explore knowledge about humanity and to test assumptions and probe and re-establish the boundaries of concepts, assumptions and beliefs.¹⁴ The paradoxographical tradition which emerges into popularity in the imperial period is one of telling stories that purport to be real, but that are arresting because they are odd and so test the boundaries of our beliefs about the world and about what is possible.¹⁵ Mucius’ act is shocking and gruesome in the extreme. It is memorable as much for the visceral horror that it evokes as for any ethical force it might have. Even if you forget why he did it or when, you are likely to retain in your mind’s eye the image of the man standing resolutely before the fire with his charred stump. It is also almost unbelievable that anyone could actually carry out such an act, let alone unflinchingly. And yet the supposed historicity of the story (as in the case of the factual claims of *paradoxa*) insists that we must believe this story and that it really happened. In this way exempla also require us to modify our ideas of the possible, or, at least, to examine the limits of the possible. In the case of exempla the focus is specifically on the limits of human capacity for virtue

liberosque esse iussit, where it is Porsenna’s alarm at the uncanny demonstrations of flourishing virtue that leads him to order that the Romans be set free).

¹³ Other exempla include similarly incredible and horrifying elements: Porcia swallowing hot coals as a means of suicide, men killing their own children, children bashing their brains out against a wall to escape captivity (for this last, see Sen. *Ep.* 77.14).

¹⁴ As Bryan Warnick puts it, discussing Emerson’s attitude towards exemplarity: ‘The examples of human lives offer answers to be sure, but perhaps even more interesting are the questions that they reveal. They may open up new lines of enquiry that otherwise may not have been possible. As we see someone doing something extraordinary, for example, we are presented with new questions: What does it say about human beings that we are capable of this sort of achievement, this sort of folly, or this sort of evil?’ (Warnick 2008: 23–24).

¹⁵ The function of ‘paradox’ as a critical term within New Criticism, related to poetry’s ‘disruptive’ role and its capacity to change perception, is relevant here. As Hardie writes in the introduction to a volume about paradox in ancient Rome: ‘The paradoxical insights of poetry “startlingly” modify our commonplace notions, and disrupt simplistic views of the world. On this view paradox has a strong epistemological function, surprise leading into a new understanding of some aspect of the world. In antiquity “paradox” has specific applications that relate to knowledge and philosophical insight. Interest in the wonderful or incredible things and practices (*thaumata, paradoxa, apista*) to be found in distant parts of the world goes back to Homer and Herodotus’ (Hardie 2009: 14–15, and nn. 33–34). Cf. Aristotle on the role of *thauma* in *Poetics* and *Metaphysics*, its association with tragic emotions of pity and fear and its relationship with knowledge, truth and verisimilitude. Cf. Popescu 2009 on the ancient genre of paradoxography.

and heroism, and exempla work with their paradoxical elements to challenge and expand our ideas about what it might be possible for a mere mortal to achieve.¹⁶

2 Comparison

Comparison is another important element of exemplarity. An exemplum calls for one to measure oneself against other people. This characteristic of exempla to border on the incredible contributes to this effect. As embodiments of the extraordinary capacity of virtue, but also of its limits, they mark out the plausible limits of human virtues, and provide a measure against which we can gauge our own capacity. The historicity of the story, however, (as in the case of *paradoxa*), still holds us fast to credibility, insisting we must believe the story and concede that it really happened. If they were fictional, such extraordinary tales would lose their epistemological bite, and no longer provide us with information about the realities of the human condition. It is important for the potential of the exemplum to both inspire and inform that they purport *really to have happened*.¹⁷ This is in part due to the power of precedent. Imagine how inspiring Aron Ralston's act would be for someone who found themselves in a similar situation and faced with a similar challenge. In the abstract, without Ralston's precedent, the idea of slowly hacking away at one's own arm with a blunt penknife until it is completely severed might seem impossible, an unattainable goal. However, when one knows that someone else has already done it, the goal seems more real and more attainable. This is one of the functions of the historicity of exempla; they offer real precedents for heroic behaviour, with the exemplary heroes as the poster-boys and poster-girls for the achievable; their stories show that potential can be actualised now because it has been actualised before. Here ethical exempla overlap with, and can play a similar role to, exempla as legal precedent, which were an important aspect of Roman law and also of political argument.

Thus Seneca encourages his correspondent Lucilius to bear his troubles bravely by reassuring him that others have borne much worse: Mucius and

¹⁶ The closeness of the modes of paradoxography and exemplarity is demonstrated by the development of the story of the death of Tagus' smiling slave, which I shall discuss in [Chapter 10](#) as an illustration of the evolution of the exemplary terrain over the first century CE.

¹⁷ Cf. the line from Florus cited previously, where he says that the stories of Horatius, Mucius and Cloelia look like fiction (*fabulae*) but must be taken as real because they are written about in the annals.

other historical exempla are cited as motivational proof that dreadful suffering, including physical pain, can be overcome if the mental attitude is strong enough. In the context of philosophical learning and discussion, he tells Lucilius that, when contemplating the obstacles in his own life that need to be overcome, he (Lucilius) should encourage himself in the following way: 'Say to yourself: of all the things that seem terrible, there is none that remains unconquered. Many people have overcome them individually: Mucius fire, Regulus crucifixion, Socrates poison, Rutilius exile, Cato death by the sword: let us too overcome something' (*dic tibi, ex istis quae terribilia videntur nihil est invictum. singula vicere iam multi, ignem Mucius, crucem Regulus, venenum Socrates, exilium Rutilius, mortem ferro adactam Cato: et nos vincamus aliquid*, Sen. Ep. 98.12). Seneca evokes Mucius among a number of notable exemplary figures who have conquered adversity in some way; together they add up to an inspiration and a model that terrible things can be overcome, and Seneca concludes: 'Let us overcome something too.'¹⁸

3 Aemulatio

The inculcation of the emotional response of *aemulatio* or zeal is an important element of exemplary learning. It integrates feeling of discomfort and anxiety about one's own relative status, feelings of rivalry with exemplary figures, and a positive motivation to achieve the same successes as the models, or even outstrip them. In moral learning today, too, in order to be motivated to act, learners need to feel, as Kristjansson puts it, following Aristotle, *pain* at their own relative lack of virtue or competence.¹⁹ The pressure that Roman culture put upon young aristocrats to live up to the virtue of their ancestors is well known, and many ancient texts testify that what Kristjansson calls the 'emulative virtue' (corresponding to Aristotle's *zeleosis*) was itself prized in Roman culture, and encouraged and inculcated through exempla themselves. Exemplarity and emulation are everywhere positively modeled and depicted in ancient Roman literature.²⁰ Failure to live up to one's ancestors, meanwhile, was castigated.²¹

¹⁸ For the philosophical and pedagogical intentions of the letters, see Edwards 1997, Inwood 2005, Schafer 2009.

¹⁹ Kristjansson 2016: III on Arist. *Rhet.* 2.11.1-4.

²⁰ See most recently Baroin 2010 for a helpful discussion of key themes and passages.

²¹ See e.g. Val. Max. 8.3.3, Juv. *Sat.* 8 with Henderson 1997.

Perhaps the two most famous and widely cited passages describing this process are Sallust *Jugurtha* 4.5 on the inspirational ancestral portraits and Polybius *Histories* 6.55 on the ancestral heroes paraded in the Roman funeral ritual. Both passages describe in idealised terms the combination of the arousal of desire for virtue and the provision of models that can shape one's behaviour. Both passages also evoke – using the same, rather clever device – the idea of exempla as facilitating the continual reproduction of values through the ages. They take figures who are widely recognised to be exempla themselves (Horatius Cocles in the case of Polybius, Fabius and Scipio in the case of Sallust), but in their accounts describe these men primarily as the 'readers' of exempla, who were themselves inspired by their heroic predecessors. In this way both passages obliquely convey the message that it is learning from and following exempla that makes a hero. They provide precedents not only of heroism itself, but also of the successful modeling of oneself on previous exempla. They are inspiring not just about heroism and virtue, but also about the potential of exemplarity to enable the replication of exemplary qualities in the behaviour of those who read them. Indeed, in this passage Sallust prioritises the moment of inspiration over the actual achievement of virtue.²² In other words, such texts are promoting, as a virtue in its own right, the propensity to emulate exemplary behaviour.²³

The effect of this first stage of emulation is to rouse the receptive moral agent to desire to mould their own behaviour accordingly, and aim for virtue and excellence in their own life. Not every moral learner will be receptive to such stimuli, so each learner must work first of all on their own emulatory virtue. Moreover, the ancient texts make clear that making the transition from this responsive stage of arousal to the next active stage of emulation, in which one applies exempla to one's own behaviour, is a challenging process. This process is frequently described as 'arduous' (*arduus*), involving hard work and good judgment, and it is a challenge to which not everyone is capable of rising.²⁴ Ancient texts express awareness of the many potential dangers and pitfalls one might encounter. For instance, it is possible to misread exempla or misapply them to oneself;

²² Cf. O'Gorman 2011: 273: 'Q. Fabius Maximus and P. Cornelius Scipio as exemplary figures . . . do not appear here as examples of virtuous action, but as examples of Romans inspired to virtue by the deeds of their ancestors.'

²³ Cf. Kristjánsson 2016 on the promotion of 'emulativeness' as a virtue in its own right.

²⁴ E.g. Cic. *Arch.* 14.; Val. Max. 4.6.pr: . . . *ardua imitatu ceterum cognosci utilia*. Val. Max. 5.8.3; Sil. *Pun.* 15.102–103 *ardua saxoso perducit semita clivo*, on the steep and rocky path of virtue; 15.131: *ardua rostra*.

exempla of virtue and vice often look deceptively similar; what is appropriate for one person might not be appropriate for another; what counts as virtue in one context does not count so in another. All these are meta-exemplary principles that are communicated through the stories and structures of Roman exemplary ethics. However, a special feature of exempla is that, in addition, these same stories and structures offer a resource for helping one to learn how to negotiate such pitfalls. The following sections outline the various ways in which exempla can be applied and implemented in the life of a learner, and also show how awareness of the challenges of implementation is articulated in ancient texts.

4 Modeling

Imitation was recognised in ancient Rome, as it is now, as an important educational method. Small children learn how to form the letters of the alphabet, in ancient Rome as today, by copying the letters written by their teachers.²⁵ *Imitatio* was also an important part of the process of moral development in ancient Rome. The language of imitation and ‘following’ is used frequently in the ancient texts (with the terms *imitari*, *aemulare*, *sequi* and their cognates) to describe how exempla should be handled. These terms are often used in conjunction with their opposite (*evitare*, ‘to avoid’). A classic and influential description of the ‘imitate and avoid’ pattern is found in Livy’s preface 9–11 (cf. Sen. *Contr.* 9.2.27; Sen. *Ira.* 3.22.1; Paul. Fest. 72.5, Ammianus pref. 10). Such terminology, found in the ancient texts and repeated often by modern scholars, can have the effect of making Roman exemplarity sound rather reductive and simplistic as well as prescriptive and clunky as a method of education.²⁶ In fact, the process of imitating an exemplum and becoming like one’s model is rather complex, and must be understood as integrated within a more sophisticated process of moral education, as this chapter will elucidate.

Although there is little discussion of *ethical* imitation in ancient literature, one sphere in which imitation is theorised is that of rhetorical training, in the two roughly contemporary rhetorical handbooks from the late republic – Cicero’s *On Invention* and the anonymous handbook

²⁵ See McDowell 1998 on the relation of this type of basic learning through imitation to Aristotelian moral theory. On learning through copying in ancient Rome, see Cribiore 1996, esp. 139–144.

²⁶ Modern references to the model include Guerrini 1981: 90 n. 33, Chaplin 2000: 3; Morgan 2007a: 182; Blom 2010: 68; Mehl 2011: 97–98; Roller 2015a. See Burke 2011: 49 for the influence of this model in the early modern period.

addressed to Herennius. Both works make it clear that imitation of models is the best way to learn how to be an orator, and that there exist many excellent examples of the skill of rhetoric. The author of the *Ad Herennium* provides a list of a number of great figures, reminiscent of the lists of moral exempla that we often encounter, and Cicero writes of the *copia exemplorum* ('abundance of examples') on which he has drawn. Nevertheless they differ strongly on the question of whether it is best to fix upon a single exemplary model, or to draw on a range of different models, taking different qualities from each.²⁷ There was clearly a lively debate in antiquity about the benefits and disadvantages of different ways of using exempla to develop one's own skills and qualities.

Cicero begins his handbook of rhetoric *On Invention*, which he wrote as a young man, with a story about imitation in art: the story of the greatest painter in the world, Zeuxis, commissioned by the people of Croton to paint a picture of Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in history. Zeuxis insists on being presented with a selection of models, five beautiful virgins from the local community, 'so that the truth can be transferred from the living exemplum into the silent copy' (*ut mutum in simulacrum ex animali exemplo veritas transferatur*, Cic. *Inv.* 2.1.2). His argument is that it is important to draw on a variety of excellent models, drawing out the best from each, rather than taking a single model and reproducing its weaknesses along with its strengths:

For he did not think that all the elements that were required to produce beauty could be found in one single body, because nature has not perfected a single example of any class so that it is perfect in every part.

neque enim putavit omnia, quae quaereret ad venustatem, uno se in corpore reperire posse ideo, quod nihil simplici in genere omnibus ex partibus perfectum natura expolivit (Cic. *Inv.* 2.3).

In this account, each example of an abstract category such as 'beauty' is only a flawed and imperfect instance of that category, and cannot by itself adequately represent that category.²⁸ Applying this model to his own work, Cicero says that his own handbook draws on and synthesises a selection of excellent models, drawing out the best from each. In addition, the lesson can be applied to the practice of oratory itself – no single orator, however

²⁷ Since these also reflect and put into play different understandings of the imitation process, this debate might be a focus of conflict between Platonic influence and Roman exemplary ethics that we see played out, for instance, in Plutarch's treatment of the issue.

²⁸ Note the similarity with Plato's theory of forms, and see further in Section 5 in this chapter for the categorisation of exempla.

magnificent, can embody absolutely every rhetorical skill, so one must pick and choose one's models – and to other areas of expertise as well, as Cicero makes explicit:

If only in the other areas of study too, people would choose what is the most appropriate from many, rather than applying themselves rigidly to one alone, they would err less in the direction of arrogance, they would not persist to such a great extent in vice, and they would labour more lightly in ignorance. And if I had as much knowledge of this area of expertise as that artist did of painting, perhaps my work might shine forth as an even nobler example of its type than his painting was of its type. For I had the possibility of choosing from a greater abundance of exempla than he did.

quodsi in ceteris quoque studiis a multis eligere homines commodissimum quodque quam sese uni alicui certe vellent addicere, minus in arrogantiam offenderent; non tanto opere in vitiis perseverarent; aliquanto levius ex inscientia laborarent. ac si par in nobis huius artis atque in illo picturae scientia fuisset, fortasse magis hoc in suo genere opus nostrum quam illius in suo pictura nobilis eniteret. ex maiore enim copia nobis quam illi fuit exemplorum eligendi potestas (Cic. *Inv.* 2.4–5).

Cicero disparages the custom of settling on a single exemplum on which to model one's own practice, which, he claims, leads to arrogance, errors, vice and ignorance. In contrast, the anonymous author of the rhetorical handbook addressed to Herennius (*Ad Herennium*), written at about the same time, argues strenuously against this method of teaching, which he identifies with Greek writers, suggesting that it is demoralising for students to give them the impression that no single person can master completely all the different skills required to be an orator.²⁹

So for someone who wants to learn, it makes a great deal of difference whether everyone can imitate [*consequi*] all the qualities, or no one can imitate all of them, or one person can imitate one and another can imitate another. For if someone believes that all qualities can exist in a single person then they will strive for ability in all respects. But if they despair of this, they will make an effort only in a few aspects and will be content with this. So when examples are drawn from Cato, the Gracchi, Laelius, Scipio, Galba, Porcina, Crassus, Antonius and the rest . . . the learner is bound to think that all the qualities can be learned from the whole group, but hardly any from each single individual.³⁰

²⁹ The opening of Book 4 of this work weaves together in an interesting fashion various approaches to the function of exempla within argument – illustration, aspiration, testimony – and explicitly sets itself in opposition to the Greek theories about the deployment of exempla.

³⁰ That was not the way that Chares learned from Lysippus how to make statues; Lysippus did not show him a head made by Myron, arms made by Praxiteles, a torso made by Polycleitus. Rather

deinde interest magni eius qui discere vult utrum omnes omnia, an omnia neminem, an aliud alium putet consequi posse. si enim putabit posse omnia penes unum consistere, ipse quoque ad omnium nitetur facultatem. si id desperarit, in paucis se exercebit; ipsis enim contentus erit . . . allatis igitur exemplis a Catone, a Graccis, a Caelio, a Scipione, Galba, Porcina, Crasso, Antonio et ceteris . . . necesse erit eum qui discet putare ab omnibus omnia, ab uno pauca vix potuisse sumi (*Rhet. ad Her.* 4. 5.7).

This author, along with many other ancient writers, suggests that one should select one particular inspirational figure – a person chosen as particularly appropriate for oneself as an individual – and use him or her as a personal role-model.³¹ This position holds that there is only incentive to attempt to master all the various virtues of oratory oneself when one believes that it is *possible* for all virtues to exist within a single person.

As these texts make clear, there is considerable disagreement in ancient Rome about how imitation of exempla works best, and a keen awareness of the various problems associated with the different models of imitation. Seneca the Elder, in the preface of the declamation textbook, *Controversiae*, that he compiled in the 30s CE for his young sons, expresses another kind of anxiety about the possibility of imitating a single model. Just as a painting can never wholly replicate its subject (even when the painter is the renowned Zeuxis, the verisimilitude of whose pictures was legendary), so an imitator will always fall short of his model:

My young men, do the necessary and useful thing; don't be content with exempla of your own era, but seek to get to know those of an earlier age as well; first because the more exempla you study, the more it benefits your eloquence. One should not imitate a single person, even if he is outstanding, because the imitator will never be equal to an original model. That's the way things are: the copy always falls short of the truth.

facitis autem, iuvenes mei, rem necessariam et utilem, quod non contenti exemplis saeculi vestri prioris quoque vultis cognoscere; primum quia, quo plura exempla inspecta sunt, plus in eloquentiam proficitur. non est unus,

Chares stood and watched the sculptor making all the parts; the works of the other sculptors he could study on his own initiative, if he wished.' *Chares ab Lysippo statuas facere non isto modo didicit, ut Lysippus caput ostenderet Myronium, brachia Praxitelis, pectus Polycleitum, sed omnia coram magistrum facientem videbat; ceterorum opera vel sua sponte poterat considerare, Rhet. Ad Her.* 4.6.9. Here imitation is the process of learning artistic skill from an excellent practitioner of that skill; in Cicero's passage *imitatio* is the process of reproducing nature in artistic form. The distinction between these two is significant when it comes to thinking about ethical imitation.

³¹ Cf. also Cic. *Orat.* 2.22.90–93; Quint. *IO* 5.19 and 10.2.23. On personal role-models and women as exempla in Pliny's letters, see Langlands 2014.

quamvis praecipuus sit, imitandus, quia numquam par fit imitator auctori.
haec rei natura est: semper citra veritatem est similitudo (Sen. *Contr.* 1, pr. 6).

This common sentiment expresses an anxiety that is influenced by the Platonic discussion of *mimesis* (artistic imitation), and focuses on the imitation of real life by art, distinguishing imitator and imitated as ‘the real thing’ (*veritas*) and ‘the copy’ (*similitudo*). In ancient thought *imitatio* was also an important technique of art and literature, theorised by Plato as *mimesis*,³² such as one might find when a portrait painter copies the person who is sitting for the portrait on to the page, or when the poet vividly describes a scene from nature.³³ The conflation of these two rather different forms of imitation – the ethical and the aesthetic – leads to some confusion in ancient thinking, but also generates some useful debates about the values of imitation and the best ways of putting it into practice.

In fact the exemplary *imitatio* that we find in Roman ethics is of a different order, although this is not something that is necessarily recognised within antiquity.³⁴ A portrait, no matter how well executed, will never be a person, since painting and person belong to the distinctly different existential orders of ‘reality’ and ‘art’. The successful imitation of a moral exemplum, on the other hand, does indeed produce a new exemplum, of the same order of being as the first on which it was modeled. Indeed, it is precisely this process of self-replication that lies at the heart of exemplarity. Thus in the passage from Sallust *Jugurtha* mentioned earlier (4.5), Scipio and Fabius are in direct competition with their glorious forebears, as they strive to become, not just like them, but better than them. Indeed, from the perspective of Sallust’s day, they *have* succeeded in becoming like them, for the sense of the passage relies on the idea that Fabius and Scipio now represent for Sallust and his contemporaries the glorious forebears whose achievements young men of his own day aspire to emulate. As we have seen, Polybius represents Horatius Coclus as an imitator of earlier exempla by which he is inspired, but he is known from Polybius’ day as one of the leading exemplary heroes himself. These ‘new’ exempla replicate the exemplary characteristics of the old exempla, even though they are not exactly the same as their models; they replicate rather than duplicate, perhaps.

³² As articulated especially in *Republic* Book 10.

³³ On *mimesis* in Plato and later authors in antiquity, see Blondell 2002, Whitmarsh 2001: 47–89; on literary imitation, see Russell 1979.

³⁴ Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ fragmentary work about literary imitation, *De Imitatione* (summarised and discussed in Whitmarsh 2001: 71–75) comes closest to articulating a form of creative imitation within the realm of literature that is also resonant with the form of ethical imitation that I have identified as in operation within Roman exemplary ethics.

The anxiety that one might fall short of one's model is still relevant for this kind of 'replicatory' imitation, however it is not impossible through exemplary *imitatio* to attain the same status as one's model. Successful exemplary imitation involves the continual generation of new exempla that follow in the footsteps of previous exempla and in turn become models to subsequent generations. Every exemplary model has been formed by imitation of a previous exemplum. Underlying this equivalence of status between the 'original' and the 'copy' in exemplary ethics is the fact that the Latin term *exemplum*, more broadly outside the ethical realm, can denote either the model or the copy of that model.³⁵

Related to this equivalence between imitator and imitated is the frequent representation in ancient texts of the relationship between the two as a rivalry in which the imitator strives to equal or even to outdo the model.³⁶ Again we see this motif in Sallust's use of the term *adaequaverit* to describe Fabius and Scipio's imitation of their ancestors (Sall. *Jug.* 4.5), and it is well illustrated by an exemplum about Themistocles that is related by Valerius Maximus, in which Themistocles is spurred on to excellence through competition with other great Athenians.³⁷ This is the sense of the Latin term *aemulatio*, which is often used in ancient literature to describe this rivalrous relationship between the exemplum and the one who imitates him. Rene Girard's theory of mimetic desire is helpful in elucidating the dynamics of Roman *aemulatio*. Girard proposes that a role-model (equivalent in his discussion to the Roman moral exemplum) plays a dual role as model and obstacle, functioning both as the object of desire and then as a rival for achieving it; this duality is also present in Roman exemplary ethics, and is reflected in the dual significance of the term *aemulatio*, which can also mean a destructive form of rivalry that prevents a moral agent from reaching their own potential.³⁸

5 Cognition

Learning through and from exempla also engages the cognitive faculties. Indeed, the cognitive role of exempla can provide a solution to some of the difficulties posed by imitation.

³⁵ OLD q.v. *exemplum* as meaning both copy and model.

³⁶ The implication that the Roman way is to take on a single model for inspiration fits well with this understanding of *aemulatio* as a rather intimate relationship between learner and exemplum, and a form of rivalry; moreover, it may be reflected in the practice of some leading Romans of promoting the idea that they had connections with specific individuals from the past (see Chaplin 2013).

³⁷ Val. Max. 8.14.ext.1.

³⁸ Girard 1965; for *aemulatio* in Roman culture, see further Langlands forthcoming.

At its simplest, learning from exempla can be understood as a fairly basic epistemological process whereby from specific individual exempla a learner attains an understanding of what a particular virtue is, or what 'virtue' in general is, or attains some other kind of knowledge about ethics. Yet the question of how exempla engage the cognitive faculties and bring about moral learning is a difficult and complex one. In this role, Roman historical exempla function as a particular type of the wider category of philosophical 'example' or 'instance', and the question of how particular examples and instances can function within moral reasoning is one that has preoccupied many philosophers throughout the Western tradition. What is the object and nature of moral knowledge? Does the general category or the particular instance have primacy? Several models for thinking about how, in general, examples work in moral reasoning have been proposed that are helpful for thinking about how the more historically situated Roman exempla might work. For instance, Kant argued that particular examples rely on and are generated in relation to pre-existing abstract categories, but can serve to render those categories more comprehensible.³⁹ Wittgenstein on the other hand proposed that understanding of abstract concepts is derived from particular examples, which grant access to a community's shared 'forms of life'.⁴⁰

The Kantian model holds that an exemplum illustrates a particular pre-existing abstract idea and thus can be used to convey this idea to the learner (especially one who is rather lacking in understanding). This model rests on the notion that the moral exemplum participates in a particular virtue or concept, and is therefore an exemplum or example of a particular moral category: an *exemplum virtutis*. This model certainly has resonance in ancient thought.⁴¹ So, for instance, Mucius might in some contexts be described as an *exemplum patientiae* – 'an example of endurance' – and his story may be used to enable someone to grasp what is meant by the term or the concept *patientia*.⁴² This model is related to the established rhetorical

³⁹ See discussion in Louden 1998. ⁴⁰ McDowell 1998, Warnick 2008: 125.

⁴¹ The phrase *exemplum virtutis* is used at e.g. Livy *Per.* 38.44.18 *exemplum quoque virtutis et pudicitiae in fama traditur*; 2.5.21 *accessit alterum virtutis exemplum* (of Mucius); *De vir. ill.* 19.1.37 (of Coriolanus) *virtutis et pietatis exemplum*; *Invectiva in Sallustium* 2.5.11 'I want to be *virtutis exemplum*'; Vitruvius 1.1; Livy 22.60 *si tot exempla virtutis non movent, nihil unquam movebit*.

⁴² On exempla as illustrations of particular virtues, see Roller 2015a, e.g. p. 82: 'the normativity of exempla depends upon categorization'. Roller's model sees the creation of moral exempla as fundamentally dependent on the categorisation of acts: 'once that audience judges the performance and assigns it value in one or more socially salient categories . . . it thereby sorts that performance into pre-constituted bins into which the other exemplary performances have already been sorted.' It may be that the metaphor Roller chooses renders the argument less convincing, since the 'bins' seem to allow for less possibility of movement between categories or nuance within categories than

role of exempla in illustration and clarification, as outlined in rhetorical handbooks, and for which Roman exempla are now best known.⁴³ In this role, exempla are facilitators of understanding. They are presented in the ancient context as being rhetorical tools that can help the audience to better understand the speaker's point. They are able to demonstrate or to illustrate what a moral quality is. They are also represented as being an easier route to comprehension, conveying moral ideas more quickly and easily than philosophical exposition and abstract reasoning.

The ancient Romans certainly held this epistemological aspect of exempla to be fundamentally important in both moral learning and moral reasoning.⁴⁴ Exempla were not only about shaping behaviour, they were also the best way to teach people – especially children – to grasp abstract moral concepts. In his handbook on oratory, for instance, Quintilian suggests that the best way to learn about abstract virtues such as 'bravery' and 'justice' is to read the stories of famous Romans who embodied them; Mucius' name is included in this list, among other leading lights of Republican heroism: 'Will anyone teach courage, justice, frugality, loyalty, continence, contempt for pain and death better than the Fabricii, the Curii, the Reguli, the Decii, the Mucii and innumerable others?' (*an fortitudinem, iustitiam, fidem, continentiam, frugalitatem, contemptum doloris ac mortis melius alii docebunt quam Fabricii, Curii, Reguli, Decii, Mucii alique innumerabiles?* Quint. *IO*, 12.2.30). In a letter to Lucilius, Seneca explicitly theorises this process of learning about virtue through exempla. His description forms part of an answer to the question of moral epistemology that is posed to him by Lucilius: How do we first come to understand what 'the good' or 'the honourable' is? How do we grasp the concept? Seneca answers in terms of learning about the abstract from the concrete, specifically citing the ancient exempla of Fabricius and Horatius Cocles as the kind of concrete particular examples through which one might learn about virtue:

We Stoics believe that [the good] has been inferred from the observation of acts done repeatedly and by comparison between them . . . Certain good deeds, certain humane deeds, certain brave deeds had amazed us; we began

I would argue is necessary for this to work for Roman exempla; for Mucius as an exemplum of *patientia*, see passages collected in Citroni 1975: 76–77, and cf. Barton 1994: 41–46.

⁴³ Lausberg 1998: 196–203.

⁴⁴ As we saw in Chapter 2, with reference to Sen. *Ep.* 6.5. Strabo *Geog.* 1.8; Sen. *ad Marc.* 2.1.

to admire them as if they were perfect. . . . Therefore from these actions we drew the appearance of great good.⁴⁵

nobis videtur observatio collegisse et rerum saepe factarum inter se conlatio . . . aliqua benigna facta, aliqua humana, aliqua fortia nos obstupescerant: haec coepimus tamquam perfecta mirari . . . ex his ergo speciem ingentis boni traximus (Sen. *Ep.* 120.4–5).

As examples of such admirable deeds he cites the particular cases of Fabricius and Horatius Cocles. Fabricius rejected the gold that king Pyrrhus offered him to betray Rome, but he also foiled an attempt to poison Pyrrhus by informing his enemy of the plot. Seneca writes: ‘We admired the great man whom neither the promises of the king nor the plot against the king could corrupt, who held fast to the good exemplum, and, what is most difficult, was innocent in war’ (Sen. *Ep.* 120.6). During the war against Porsenna, Horatius Cocles held off the approaching enemy single-handedly on the bridge to prevent them entering Rome, ordering his comrades to destroy the bridge behind him. Seneca concludes: ‘These deeds and others of the same sort show us a likeness of virtue (*imaginem virtutis*)’ (Sen. *Ep.* 120.8).

However, Seneca will go on to argue that such a process is merely a first step in ethical understanding and does not get one very far. It represents, in fact, the sort of basic epistemological process through which all children will go when they first acquire a basic understanding of what words denoting virtue mean. This is why the verbs in this passage are all in the past tense; Seneca is describing how he and his readers (‘we’) have reached their adult grasp of moral concepts such as justice and courage, from repeatedly encountering these virtues in famous exempla during their formative years.

Seneca may seem to be presenting here an inductive model of learning from examples, whereby one is able to access an understanding of the abstract moral concept by contemplating concrete individual instances of that moral concept. Such a model is not restricted to moral learning of course, but can also be extremely effective in the contexts of both moral reasoning and education in non-moral areas such as writing, music, drawing and sport.⁴⁶ However, Seneca also emphasises the emotive motivational effect of these stories on children, as they experience amazement and

⁴⁵ On this letter and its philosophical significance, see Inwood 2005: 322–332 and Inwood 2007.

⁴⁶ The application of the model to these different processes helps to show that learning and thinking are part of the same process of engaging with exempla, perhaps along a continuum. Cf. McDowell 1998 for a discussion of what such a process of learning from examples might actually entail when it comes to moral learning, drawing on Aristotelian theories on moral education.

awe and are dazzled by the exaggerated representations of virtue – an important aspect, as we have seen, of Roman exemplarity. At this stage of moral development, moreover, learners must ignore the flaws and complications of the exempla, which are disguised by their glamour (*fulgor*): ‘Many flaws underlay these exempla, which the surface and splendour of the particular conspicuous deed concealed; we ignored them. Nature orders praiseworthy things to be exaggerated; there is no one who has not gone beyond the truth in their praise of glory’ (*suberant illis multa vitia quae species conspicui alicuius facti fulgorque celabat; haec dissimulavimus. natura iubet augere laudanda, nemo non gloriam ultra verum tulit*, Sen. *Ep.* 120.5). So as to enhance this childhood learning, Seneca explains, Nature herself tends to help us by inclining us to exaggerate the virtues with praise so that they appear more obvious and visible to us in these heroic tales. Thus the understanding of virtue that we have arrived at through contemplation of these exempla is, it turns out, imperfect, since it was gained through flawed examples, and reason was enhanced by emotion.

Seneca makes it clear, then, that one does not have access, through exempla, to a perfect grasp of moral excellence; far from it. What one reaches through this elementary process is a very basic and flawed grasp of what virtue is. The process of learning from exempla represents not so much access to a range of universal abstractions, as to a culturally agreed body of moral values and models, with all the complexity and contradictions that these entail. Indeed, it is perhaps better thought of less as an inductive process and rather a process of acculturation, which may be the first step towards a more sophisticated, critical and adult grasp of moral ideas. The average Roman youth, not in the least philosophically minded, can acquire through this process an adequate working knowledge of virtues so as to understand how to act virtuously without needing to be able to state definitively what virtue is, and participate thereby in a shared value system and moral language.⁴⁷

In [Chapter 6](#) we shall look at how this working knowledge of virtue corresponds to a ‘working consensus’ about the exemplary stories, and can provide the basis for further exploration of ethical concepts by more sophisticated thinkers, such as philosophers. In this letter, Seneca suggests that to reach a higher level of understanding of ethical concepts, as befits the philosopher, further intellectual work is needed to penetrate beneath

⁴⁷ This is a more Wittgensteinian conceptualisation of the process; cf. McDowell 1998 on moral knowledge and uncodifiability in Greek ethics.

the surface of these flawed and misleading examples. However, the familiar Roman exempla have facilitated these crucial initial steps in the process and a Roman who is philosophically inclined, or ethically curious, like Seneca and his correspondent Lucilius, can use this working knowledge as a foundation for further enquiry and refinement, which will involve, among other things, seeing beyond the misleading surface of familiar exempla. Even at this advanced (adult) level of moral development, exempla aid the acquisition of such skills as distinguishing virtue and vice in the difficult cases, and negotiating moral complexity, since it is scrutiny and experience of exempla that helps to develop such skills. Exempla, then, have the capacity to play different roles at different stages of moral development. For a child encountering them for the first time they enable the first steps towards a basic epistemological grasp of moral ideas, facilitating an understanding of what terms such as ‘courage’ mean at a basic semantic level.⁴⁸ Yet they can then be used to facilitate complex ethical deliberation and more mature ethical development and refinement, fostering skills related to moral discernment.

6 Discernment

One significant obstacle to successful exemplary imitation is the fact that appearances can be deceptive. Instances of vice can look like virtue and vice versa.⁴⁹ The ability to distinguish correctly between virtues and vices that look very similar is also important when it comes to decisions about one’s own behaviour. The fatal consequences of getting this wrong are dramatised by Seneca in his treatise on anger through his account of the story of Cn. Piso, who brings about the death of three men, two of them innocent, because he mistakenly believes there is virtue in refusing to go back on a previous decision to condemn a man to death, even when it is revealed to be based on an error. As Seneca puts it: ‘He mistook “inflexibility” (*rigor*) for the virtue of perseverance (*constantia*)’ (Sen. *Ira* 1.18.3).

⁴⁸ Again, there are parallels to the acquisition of other basic cultural skills, such as language and literacy; cf. Quintilian in *IO* Book 1 who describes teaching children to recognise what a letter is by showing them multiple versions of the same thing. Exempla are the alphabet blocks of virtue, as Valerius Maximus (almost) says, when he describes them as *elementa virtutis* (Val. Max. 3.1.pr.). This model of moral learning enables us to gain a richer sense of what might be meant by this. However, see Cic. *Fin.* 5.59, where this same phrase *elementa virtutis* describes the innate qualities that allow human beings to learn about virtue, rather than resources for learning.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 13 for further discussion of the exemplary motifs embedded in the career of Fabius Maximus. In that case, we see how easy it was for onlookers with insufficiently honed moral judgment to evaluate and classify Fabius’ actions wrongly.

The Latin term *imitari* itself encompasses this disconcerting idea; as well as meaning to follow someone's example and to emulate them, it can also mean 'to look like' or to 'copy' something or someone in a superficial way. Indeed the term *imitari* is regularly used by Latin authors to express this very anxiety about the superficial resemblance between vice and virtue, a resemblance that is obviously a potential obstacle to moral learning.⁵⁰ Seneca articulates this idea about deceptive appearances in relation to moral epistemology in his letter to Lucilius, discussed in the previous sections, where he describes the process by which as children we came to know what virtue looked like through the contemplation of exemplary heroes whom we admired. After revealing that exempla are in fact flawed, and work by dazzling us with a superficial and artificially enhanced brightness, he goes on to tell Lucilius that they are often downright deceptive in appearance, not least because of the dangerous proximity of virtue to vice and the way that deeds which appear on the face of it to be almost identical can actually embody entirely opposite moral qualities:

Evil exempla have sometimes taken on the appearance of the good, and the best has shone out from its opposite. For there are, as you know, vices on the borders with virtues, and also there is a resemblance between the most shameful and debased things and the righteous; thus the spendthrift looks misleadingly like a generous man, even though there is a great difference between a man who knows how to give and a man who does not know how to save . . . Negligence 'imitates'⁵¹ ease, recklessness imitates bravery. This similarity forces us to attend carefully and to distinguish qualities that are very similar in appearance but are very different in reality.

mala interdum speciem honesti obtulere et optimum ex contrario enituit. sunt enim, ut scis, virtutibus vitia confinia, et perditis quoque ac turpibus recti similitudo est: sic mentitur prodigus liberalem, cum plurimum intersit, utrum quis dare sciat an servare nesciat . . . imitatur neglegentia facilitatem, temeritas fortitudinem. haec nos similitudo coegit adtendere et distinguere specie quidem vicina, re autem plurimum inter se dissidentia (Sen. *Ep.* 120.8–9).

Seneca concludes from this that it is imperative to take great care when evaluating deeds. This is the case whether they are the actions of other people around us, traditional exempla that are held up to us as admirable, or our own actions that we propose to take in due course. In all cases, to be

⁵⁰ For expressions of this anxiety, see e.g. Cic. *Off.* 3.32 *fuit igitur stulta calliditas perverse imitata prudentiam*; Cic. *Tusc.* 3.2; Sen. *Clem.* 1.3.1.

⁵¹ That is to say: 'looks like' or 'copies'.

a good person one needs to learn how to make very fine distinctions between good and evil, and to look beyond the immediate appearance of things so as to distinguish between good and bad even when they look very similar. In this letter, Seneca urges his philosophically inclined friend Lucilius to look beyond the surface of exempla, to appreciate their moral flaws and to cultivate his skills of moral discernment.⁵²

Grasping what a virtue really is on this more philosophically sophisticated level corresponds to what Brad Inwood calls ‘getting to goodness’, a phrase which emphasises the aspect of moral growth, and what the modern philosopher John McDowell calls ‘cottoning on’, which emphasises the cognitive aspect of the process.⁵³ Returning to the case of Mucius and *patientia* for a moment, such a process might entail reaching a deeper understanding of such issues as how *patientia* is to be put into practice in one’s own life and actions; when *patientia* is good and when it might be appropriate to deploy it; what kinds of actions might look like *patientia* but might actually be something else; what the dangers might be in trying to achieve *patientia*; what other values or virtues might be compromised in its pursuit. This kind of more advanced ethical growth is achieved through the identification of the problems and contradictions within the moral knowledge one already possesses, and through the consideration of difficult cases that test one’s understanding of virtues. Although Seneca represents these as high-level philosophical skills that take the educated man beyond the basic, deceptive understanding of moral ideas which he had acquired in childhood, and although he describes exempla as flawed and deceptive, we should not conclude from this that exempla must be abandoned at this stage of moral development. Seneca and his fellow Romans knew full well that exempla can go on being useful even in advanced philosophical debate (as we will see in the [following chapter](#)); it is a question of developing the critical skills that enable one to see beneath their surface and handle them in a different and more sophisticated way. Exempla are very well suited for both stimulating and sustaining such higher-level ethical processes; they have the capacity to draw attention to ethical issues and to provide specific case studies for exploring these.⁵⁴ Exempla can be used not only to establish

⁵² This is a stimulating and engaging philosophical passage, as Inwood’s discussions of it make plain (Inwood 2005 and 2007 ad loc.).

⁵³ Inwood 2005, McDowell 1998. Schafer has described the process taking place in Seneca’s Letters to Lucilius as ‘Adult Education’ (Schafer 2009: 37).

⁵⁴ As Richardson-Hay points out in a footnote to her commentary on the text: ‘As an exercise in judgement which teaches one to recognise and evaluate moral purpose, *exempla* can be regarded as a key aspect in the practice of Philosophy’s lesson’ (Richardson-Hay 2006: 103, n. 223).

the nature and boundaries of a moral concept, but also to identify and explore the moral debates that surround it, as well as to hone moral judgment and develop other moral skills.

For instance, one of the exemplary principles encoded within exemplary ethics is that behaviour which at first sight looks like one thing may look very different once one takes the time to appreciate the situation. Understanding the actor's motivation and the particulars of the circumstances makes all the difference to the evaluation of a deed, and a tiny detail can be the difference between virtue and vice, both when it comes to evaluating an action and when it comes to deciding how to act. In his treatise *On Anger* Seneca relates a number of troubling exempla, but there is one passage in particular where he explicitly points out the importance of context for interpretation and moral evaluation of behaviour. This is the story of the unfortunate Pastor and his cruel treatment at the hands of the emperor Caligula, which is presented as an exemplum about the possibility of controlling one's anger even in extreme circumstances.⁵⁵ Caligula has arrested the man's son on trivial grounds – he does not like the way the young man dresses. While his son is in prison, the father petitions Caligula, begging him to spare his son's life. In response, Caligula at once has the young man killed, and then he immediately invites the father to dinner in order to watch him closely as he copes with his bereavement. He plies him with wine and offers him garlands, all the time scrutinising his demeanour and enquiring regularly whether he is enjoying himself. The poor father controls his grief and anger, drinks the wine, wears the garlands, and claims to be having a wonderful time. Seneca concludes with an address to the reader: 'Do you ask why? He had another son . . . ' (*quaeris quare? habebat alterum* . . . Sen. *Ira* 2.33.5).

This passage shows us that it is easy to misunderstand a narrative if salient details are missing, just as it is when it comes to interpreting an exemplum; you need to know the pertinent circumstances in order to evaluate what you see. In this case, the revelation that the man has another son whom he is trying to protect from the emperor's whimsical brutality prompts a concluding re-evaluation of the tale's significance. Seneca goes on to make it clear that our knowledge that Pastor had another son should radically affect how we understand his motivation

⁵⁵ Seneca's exempla in this treatise work on a number of levels (see further in [Chapter 13](#)), and here this exemplum is also working to communicate the sense that one needs to take time to ascertain the truth about a situation before acting, which is precisely the skill associated with the control of anger.

for enduring the cruelty of the tyrant without protest. Up until this detail is revealed we might have been forgiven for interpreting his behaviour as fear or grief after his son's shocking death, or desire to protect himself from further cruelty from the emperor. In such circumstances that is how many people would no doubt have reacted, quite understandably. However, Seneca put his readers right: 'You would have despised that Roman father if he had feared for his own sake; but in this case it was *pietas* that repressed his anger' (*contempsisses Romanum patrem, si sibi timuisset: nunc iram comperescuit pietas*, 2.33.6). His actual motivation is revealed to be a just one, and allows us to evaluate his behaviour positively; he endures without lament or protest in order to protect the life of his surviving child.⁵⁶

Seneca has also, in the letter to Lucilius discussed earlier, alerted us to another problem: vices and virtues border on one another. This means that moral judgment is not just a question of knowing how to recognise virtue and see beneath the surface of deceptive appearances. It can also involve deciding where to draw the line.⁵⁷ Exempla regularly acknowledge this proximity of virtue and vice. In the exemplary terrain the virtue of strictness (*severitas*) is regularly shown to border on cruelty and brutality, courage on rashness, clemency on overindulgence – and these pairs of qualities often look very similar. Individual exempla invite learners to exercise and refine their judgment about where to draw the boundaries between such virtues and vices. Such an invitation to consider the boundaries between virtue and vice can be issued by a contested site of exemplarity, when it is unclear whether the exemplary act represents a virtue or a vice.⁵⁸ Situated on these boundaries, exempla often draw attention to the extremes of a concept in order to allow a moral learner to come to a better appreciation of where the boundaries of that concept might lie. Similarly, Valerius Maximus uses the case of the magistrate Domitius to explore where the virtue of *severitas* might border on

⁵⁶ Later on, at 3.13.7–3.25, Seneca makes this point again, more forcefully and from another angle, by telling yet more horrific tales of men whose children are mutilated by tyrants; in these cases, the men do not have surviving sons and Seneca says they should therefore have killed themselves in protest, and he condemns them for not having the courage to do so; liberty, in those circumstances, should have been preferred to servitude.

⁵⁷ Valerius Maximus uses the exemplum of Fulvius Flaccus to consider the boundary between *saevitia* and *constantia* when he juxtaposes two versions of the same episode that are focalised and interpreted differently: at 3.2.ext.1 (on courage) the hero is Vibellius who berates Fulvius for his *crudelitas*, whereas later in the same book, at 3.8.1, Fulvius is represented as the hero, displaying the virtue of *constantia*.

⁵⁸ As in the case, for example, of Manlius Torquatus, discussed in the following chapter and in Chapters 12 and 13. On the concept of the 'site of exemplarity' see Chapters 8 and 9.

savagery. When a shepherd presented Domitius with an enormous boar that he had killed, Domitius had the unfortunate man crucified for disobeying a ban on hunting, and Valerius comments: ‘some might say that this should be placed on the borderline between severity and savagery’ (Val. Max. 6.3.5).⁵⁹

Exempla are often situated on these kind of moral boundaries, and they provide a means of negotiating on two fronts the difficulty posed by the similarities between vice and virtue. First, they heighten awareness of the difficulties of evaluating deeds and of perceiving true virtue, distinguishing it either from vice or from error. Second, they offer a pragmatic strategy for tackling the question of the boundaries of virtues and vices, as particular examples against which abstract concepts can be tested and one’s grasp of them refined. In Book 5 of his collection of exempla, Valerius Maximus again explores the problematic borders between the vice of brutality and the virtue of severity, between discipline and cruelty, and mercy and over-indulgence, through his interwoven sequences of exempla illustrating and problematising these qualities.⁶⁰ However, nowhere does Valerius Maximus provide any explicit guidelines for working out which virtue is more appropriate in a given situation. Rather, the sense is that through the repeated observation and scrutiny of particular exempla one is led through in this work, one will develop the sensitivity to particular circumstances that will enable one to act virtuously in one’s own case. This corresponds to the Kantian idea of using examples as ‘go-carts’ to refine one’s judgment, and test one’s grasp of abstract moral concepts.⁶¹

These very same meta-ethical ideas about the challenges of moral epistemology that are expressed by Seneca are a fundamental aspect of Roman exemplary ethics, and are handed down through the generations alongside and within the stories themselves.⁶² Ideas about the proximity of vice and virtue, the resemblance between good deeds and bad, the difficulties of discriminating between them, the need to continue to work on developing one’s skills of evaluation are all found embedded in

⁵⁹ For discussion of this case, see Langlands 2008: 181–182.

⁶⁰ This lengthy sequence of exempla also articulates the competing benefits and disadvantages of the opposing virtues of leniency and severity (see detailed discussion of these passages in Langlands 2006: 138–191; Langlands 2008: 168–169).

⁶¹ Lowrie and Lüdemann 2015: 4 on the Kantian use of examples as ‘go-carts of judgment’.

⁶² See Chapter 13 for demonstration of how these ideas can be embedded in sites of exemplarity, for instance through the different perceptions and evaluations of Fabius’ deeds.

the exemplary material that we find throughout ancient texts of every kind.⁶³ The following chapter will further explore how such meta-exemplary principles are transmitted with the exemplary material in ancient texts, and in particular how the multiplicity of exempla has an important role to play within exemplary ethics.

⁶³ Cf. Langlands 2008. In a book currently in preparation which she has been kind enough to share with me in draft form, Eleanor Brooke discusses the pertinent example of the interpretation of Verres' scars in Cicero's *Verrines*; Verres' scars look just like the scars of a war hero, indeed they look exactly like the scars of his predecessor Aquilius which had been used in court as evidence of his virtue, but the story behind them, as Cicero tells it, is in fact very different, and they should be read as evidence of vice rather than virtue in this particular case.

*Multiplicity, Breadth, Diversity and Situational
Sensitivity in Exemplary Ethics*

One of the features that enhance the capacity of exempla to facilitate deliberation, discernment and learning is their multiplicity. Roman exempla are very often cited in clusters or grouped together under a particular heading or within a particular category. This is how they are presented, for instance, in each of the chapters in Valerius Maximus' work, or in the speeches of Cicero, or in the philosophical works of Seneca, and also, to some extent, in the Forum of Augustus or in Virgil's parade of heroes in *Aeneid* 6.824–859, where the category is the broader one of Roman exemplary heroism. In such contexts, the similarities between the examples allow one to identify what they have in common, and to learn about the abstract quality or virtue that labels the category. A number of different instances of heroic courage, cited side by side, can serve to illustrate the range of different acts that count as courageous and fall within the parameters of the concept. This is a pragmatic method of communicating an understanding of moral ideas that might otherwise be hard to explain. As the modern philosopher Jonathan Dancy has put it, writing about epistemology and moral particularism: 'If one cannot explicate a philosophically significant concept, there may be other ways of giving people a sense that the concept is itself in good order and that they have a reasonably clear grasp of it. One way of doing this is to work through a range of examples showing how the concept applies to them and showing that there is a graspable distinction between cases in which it applies and occasions in which it does not apply.'¹

Within the boundaries of virtues as they are mapped out by sequences of exempla like this, the variety of different exempla that are available to be cited within each category may also enable a more complex grasp of particular moral categories, including a sense of their breadth and limits. In Valerius Maximus' collection of exempla under category headings, for

¹ Dancy 2004: 38.

instance, the chapter on courage (3.2 on *fortitudo*) presents a series of exempla that cover a wide range of possible activities, in different spheres of life, undertaken by different kinds of people, all of which might count as courageous. The specific way that courage is enacted varies according to the specifics of context and person. At first we see a range of courageous exploits undertaken in a military context from the deeds of famous generals to those of unknown foot-soldiers; then we see courage in the civic sphere, and finally those undertaken in more domestic settings. The protagonists of the exempla range from famous Roman magistrates and generals to foreign slaves, girls and women, as well as men.² The variation between these exempla demonstrates the variety of ways that courage can be manifested in individual acts and the range of the concept of courage itself. Appreciating what the common element is that makes all these different examples instances of the same abstract concept is precisely to grasp something about what that concept is; what they have in common is the abstract notion of 'courage'.

In general, such diversity among exempla that are cited in the same context also highlights the difficulties associated with applying exempla to one's own behaviour. By making it clear that there is a range of different ways that it is possible to enact each moral quality, such lists of various exempla make it harder for each individual moral agent to decide how he or she should enact the virtue, highlighting the need for further skills: the abilities to discern what counts as true virtue, to know oneself and one's own particular circumstances, and to judge what is appropriate for these. What counts as virtuous for one person may well not count as virtuous for another, and when it comes to one's own behaviour one must be very careful to ascertain what is right for oneself.

Similarly, when one chooses an exemplary model one needs to make absolutely sure that one has chosen a model that is suitable specifically for

² A full list of the exempla listed in chapter 3.2: Horatius Coclès (3.2.1), Cloelia (2), Romulus (3), Cornelius Cossus (4), M. Marcellus (5), T. Manlius Torquatus, Valerius Corvinus and Scipio Aemilianus (6), the elders of Rome against the Gaulish invasion, and especially C. Atilius (7), the young warriors of Rome against the Volsci (8), the equestrian order (9), ordinary soliders who pulled a Punic ship back to shore (10), the anonymous soldier at Cannae who gnawed the Numidian's face off (11), P. Crassus provoking his own murder (12), Scipio Metellus (13), Cato of Utica (14), his daughter Porcia (15), Cato the Elder (16), Scipio Nasica rousing opposition to Tiberius Gracchus (17), the aged M. Aemilius Scaurus (18), divine Julius Caesar (19), prefect Vibius Accaus (20), the brave soldier Q. Occius (21), Acilius (22), M. Caesius Scaeva and Scaevius (23), L. Siccius Dentatus (24), Vibellius Taurea the rebellious Capuan (ext. 1), Darius, King of Persia (ext. 2), the Spartan Leonidas (ext. 3), Othryades (ext. 4), Epaminondas (ext. 5), Theramenes of Athens (ext. 6), Rhoetogenes of Numantia (ext. 7), Hasdrubal's wife (ext. 8), the Syracusan princess Harmonia and her slave girl (ext. 9).

oneself.³ It is no good picking a 'Fabius' if you are more of a Scipio-type. As Cicero warns us, 'Someone who wants to get it right, must first be careful in making his choice [of model]' *qui autem ita faciet, ut oportet, primum vigilet necesse est in deligendo* (Cic. *Orat.* 2.90). Ancient writers often suggest that the best exempla are those most similar to the moral agent.⁴ Even so, once one has chosen an appropriate model, there remains the further challenge of grasping which aspects of it are particularly relevant, which aspects are virtuous and which can and should be imitated in one's own particular circumstances. Cicero continues: 'Next, in the model he has chosen, he must follow extremely selectively those aspects which are most excellent', *deinde, quem probarit, in eo, quae maxime excellent, ea diligentissime persequatur* (Cic. *Orat.* 2.90).⁵ Behaviour which might be appropriate for certain individuals in certain circumstances may be completely unacceptable if done by others in different circumstances.⁶ This need to understand the particular requirements of one's own situation and how they differ from those of one's exemplary model is one of the key challenges of exemplary ethics. A moral learner must develop critical skills to deploy during *imitatio* or other learning.

Livy's tragic yet salutary account of Manlius Torquatus and the son whom he is forced to execute for the sake of military discipline provides a cautionary tale about this danger of misunderstanding the value and appropriateness of one's chosen model, and misapplying its lessons.⁷ Livy's account of the failure of the son's interpretation and imitation of his father's exemplum conveys meta-ethical messages about the pitfalls of ethical imitation. When the son accepts the Gaul's challenge to single combat he does so against a backdrop of multiple precedents for such behaviour (or so he thinks), including not only his own father's example of

³ Cf. Sen. *ad Marc.* 2.3: 'Choose the exemplum that you think is the most suitable', *elige itaque utrum exemplum putes probabilius*.

⁴ E.g. Pliny *Ep.* 8.13: 'You see whom you must follow, whose footsteps you must tread in. Oh, you are so fortunate that the best exemplum and the one that is closest to you are one and the same, that you have indeed as the most powerful exemplum to imitate, the very one that nature wishes to be most similar to you!' *vides quem sequi, cuius debeas implere vestigia. o te beatum, cui contigit unum atque idem optimum et coniunctissimum exemplar, qui denique eum potissimum imitandum habes, cui natura esse te simillimum voluit!*

⁵ See further Langlands 2011 on the important principle of situational variation in relation to learning from moral exempla.

⁶ As Cicero puts it: 'No one should make the mistake of thinking that just because Socrates or Aristippus did or said something that went against established customs, it is okay for *him* to do it', *nec quemquam hoc errore duci oportet, ut siquid Socrates aut Aristippus contra morem consuetudinemque civilem fecerint locutivae sint, idem sibi arbitretur licere* (Cic., *Off.* 1.148).

⁷ See Chapter 13 for extensive discussion of this exemplum. Cf. Feldherr 1998: 85 for the exemplum as a cautionary tale.

single combat (Livy 7.10), but also the successful imitation of Torquatus' exemplary deed by Valerius Corvinus in the intervening years (Livy 7.26.2).⁸ Livy makes it clear that the son fights his duel on the understanding that he is imitating and replicating the famous virtue of his father; or at least this is what he tells his father.⁹ Laying the spoils from his fight before his father, he says: 'so that everyone would say, father, that I am truly born from your blood, having been challenged to a duel, I am bringing you these spoils from the slain enemy' (*'ut me omnes' inquit, 'pater, tuo sanguine ortum vere ferrent, provocatus equestria haec spolia capta ex hoste caeso porto'* Liv. 8.7.13).

At first sight, this looks like just the kind of reenactment of virtues of the father that was so valued by the ancient Romans.¹⁰ Yet in this case the son has tragically misunderstood his father's exemplum, and failed to understand where the true virtue of his father's action lay. Whereas Corvinus had correctly understood that the courageous fight needs to be undertaken within the framework of military command and discipline, Torquatus' son does not grasp this ethical aspect of his father's deed, and he makes the fatal mistake of fighting the Gaul without first obtaining permission to do so – indeed, against the express orders of his father and commander not to engage the enemy.¹¹ Torquatus the father had not been seeking glory for himself or his own family, even though this may have been his ultimate reward. Rather, in this version of the story, he was acting on behalf of the army, and he obtained permission to fight the duel from his commander. The story emphasises, in particular, the need to understand the reasons *why* exemplary protagonists acted the way they did, as Manlius the son had failed to do. As a result, his misguided deed incurs not glory but execution by his own father. The son ends up being a contrasting exemplum that highlights the important qualities of the similar, but successful, exempla of Corvinus and others. One lesson of this episode is how careful one must be to grasp the real significance of a virtuous deed and not to imitate the

⁸ See Chapter 1.

⁹ The description of the duel itself, earlier in the text, is more critical, and makes the young man's motivation look dubious: 'The young man was moved to a fierce spirit whether by anger or by shame of losing a competition or an overweening desire for death. Disregarding the orders of his father and the consular edict, he went headlong into the fight, in which it didn't matter much who won or lost . . .', *movet ferocem animum iuvenis seu ira seu detractandi certaminis pudor seu inexsuperabilis vis fati. oblitus itaque imperii patrii consulumque edicti, praeceps ad id certamen agitur, quo vinceret an vinceretur haud multum interesset . . .* (Livy 8.7.8).

¹⁰ See Baroin 2010 and Pascoe-Pranger 2015: 312 on what she calls 'virtue-based genealogy'.

¹¹ Feldherr 1998: 105–110.

wrong aspects of it, inspired by a misleading *vana imago* of virtue (8.7.18), like those deceptive appearances against which Seneca warns Lucilius.¹²

Sometimes successful imitation can indeed involve very close structural imitation of the model; for instance, the Decii, modeling the passing down of virtues within families, imitate one another so closely that it is not easy or even necessary to distinguish between them.¹³ However, such precise replication of the model's behaviour is usually not the case. In contrast to the failed imitation of T. Manlius Torquatus by his son, a later scion of the same Torquati family is praised by Valerius Maximus for the profound wisdom that enables him not only to appraise the portraits of his famously stern ancestor, but also to imitate in his own behaviour the ancestral quality of paternal *severitas* that was exhibited by Manlius (Val. Max. 5.8.3). In this case, Torquatus' son D. Silanus has been accused of misconduct as a governor in the province of Macedonia, and Torquatus insists on hearing the case himself, in his own home, rather than allowing the senate to take it on. After hearing all the evidence he finds his son guilty of bribery and sentences him to exile, banishing him from home and country immediately: 'Since it has been proved to me that my son Silanus took bribes from our allies, I judge that he is unworthy to belong either to this community or to my own household, and so I command him to get out of my sight immediately' (*'cum Silanum filium meum pecunias a sociis accepisse probatum mihi sit, et re publica eum et domo mea indignum iudico protinusque e conspectu meo abire iubeo'*, Val. Max. 8.5.3). The son cannot bear the judgment of his father and takes his own life that night: 'Stunned by the harsh sentence from his father, Silanus was unable to bear another day, and he killed himself that night by hanging' (*tam tristi patris sententia percussus Silanus lucem ulterius intueri non sustinuit suspendioque se proxima nocte consumpsit*). It is at this point in the story that Torquatus' true mettle is proven, and he really channels the spirit of his ancestor, by insisting on continuing to prioritise his public commitments above his family, as he boycotts his son's funeral and continues to conduct public business in his home:

¹² Cf. Roller's discussion of 'The Problem of Exempla' (Roller 2001: 88–97), which he poses thus: 'How can figures from the past, any more than one's own contemporaries, be praised and blamed on the basis of their observed and recorded actions, if such actions are not a reliable guide to the internal dispositions in which alone moral value resides?' (Roller 2001: 88). True virtue is to be found in the intention and disposition of the moral agent, and this is not always evident from observing the deed itself; however, Roller suggests that with the proper philosophical training, one can learn to 'infer moral value correctly' (Roller 2001: 95).

¹³ Liv. 10.26–30, Hor. *Sat.* 1.6, Val. Max. 5.6.6.

He did not attend the young man's funeral, and, even as the funeral was taking place, he made himself available to listen to those who wished to consult him: for he saw that was sitting in that very hall in which the portrait of that Torquatus Imperiosus was located, conspicuous in its severity, and to that wisest of men it seemed that it was the custom to place the effigies of ancestors with their labels in this first part of the building so that descendants might not only read about their virtues, but also imitate them.

ille neque exsequiis adulescentis interfuit et, cum maxime funus eius duceretur, consulere se volentibus vacuas aures accommodavit: videbat enim se in eo atrio consedisse, in quo imperiosi illius Torquati severitate conspicua imago posita erat, prudentissimoque viro succurrebat effigies maiorum cum titulis suis idcirco in prima parte aedium poni solere, ut eorum virtutes posterius non solum legerent, sed etiam imitarentur (Val. Max. 5.8.3).

Valerius makes it clear that this is a particularly successful case of imitation, where the imitator is 'the wisest of men' (*prudentissimo*), who understands how one's own behaviour ought to be shaped by interpreting and emulating the virtues of ancestral exempla. However, in this case of successful imitation, the actual behaviour of this later Torquatus is very different from that of his forebears. His own son is a criminal, not a headstrong hero; he condemns him to exile rather than executing him publicly for the sake of military discipline; and his primary enactment of the virtue of *severitas* is to continue with his public administration rather than attend his son's funeral. It is clear, then, that successful imitation need not entail replicating the actions of the model, but rather striving towards the same end, and aiming to reproduce in one's own way the particular virtues of one's model.¹⁴ There is a degree of flexibility about how one as a moral agent may implement virtue according to one's own circumstances, through a process of creative imitation, but this needs to be informed by a fine sensitivity to the requirements of different circumstances.

In summary, these principles that are handed down by the exemplary tradition, which one might summarise as 'sensitivity to different circumstances' or 'situational sensitivity', are that a virtue may manifest itself very differently in different situations, and behaviour that is right in one instance may not be right in another; different circumstances call for different ways of implementing virtue. These ideas have important implications when it comes to interpreting exempla, as well: when assessing and interpreting an exemplum you need to take time to look carefully at the situation in order to fully appreciate its moral significance and value. They

¹⁴ For this idea, see also e.g. Cicero *Pro Caelio* 72, Seneca's *Consolatio ad Polybium* 17, Suet. *Aug.* 3.2.

also have implications for moral deliberation and action in one's own life: it is crucial to be able to judge, when one is making moral decisions, the specific requirements of one's own situation and to tailor one's behaviour accordingly. If one judges wrongly, one can end up very far astray – as we have seen there is a thin line between virtue and vice.¹⁵ Roman exemplary ethics teaches that ability to evaluate the significance of circumstances of all kinds is crucially important, and it is a skill that one must continue to refine and develop.

When one's own circumstances are rather different from those that generated one's exemplary model, it may be that to be true to the virtue of one's chosen exemplum one needs to act very differently. One needs to be ready to act in a way that may be completely different from the action of one's model. In Tacitus' *Annals*, towards the end of Book 16 (just before the text breaks off), Tacitus is describing the death of the Stoic Thrasea Paetus, and tells us very briefly how Thrasea prevented his wife Arria the Younger from dying with him as she wanted to do, convincing her that her virtues are best demonstrated in other ways. Arria wanted to imitate the loyalty and courage of her own mother, who had killed herself alongside her husband. She is in danger of making the mistake (like the young Torquatus) of imitating her model's act too closely and of not considering the specific contextual requirements. Her husband is able to persuade her that in this case the loyal and courageous choice is precisely opposite to the actions of her mother. The requirements of her particular circumstances are different. Just as Seneca's Pastor has a son whose life he must protect, so Arria has a daughter, Fannia, and this is where she must direct her courage and her loyalty. In this case it is best that she has the courage to survive him, staying alive in order to tend to their young daughter, once he himself has gone:

And when Arria was trying to follow him in death and imitate the exemplum of her mother Arria he warned her to keep hold of her life and not to deprive the daughter they shared of her only protection.

Arriamque temptantem mariti suprema et exemplum Arriae matris sequi monet retinere vitam filiae communi subsidium unicum non adimere (Tac. *Ann.* 16.34).

Arria can best reproduce the virtues of her exemplary model by acting in precisely the opposite way from that model: once again this imperial

¹⁵ This also relates to the Aristotelian model of virtue and vice, which shares some significant features with the ethical system of Roman exempla, as I shall go on to discuss later in this chapter.

exemplum dramatises the process of leaping too quickly to moral judgment, showing the reader that what looks at first sight like one thing might in fact be another. Here Arria believed that surviving her brave husband would be an act of cowardice and disloyalty, but she comes to realise that it is fact an act of *pietas* towards her daughter.¹⁶

Paradoxically, then, sometimes the best way to imitate the virtues of one's model is precisely to reverse their act. At the end of his chapter on courage (3.2, *De fortitudine*), Valerius Maximus frames his final exemplary tale in such a way as to bring out precisely this aspect of situational variability. This is a tale of two young women whose acts of virtue are the inverse of one another's, even though the second directly emulates the first. The scene is an assassination attempt on the Carthaginian princess Harmonia:

And when the enemies rushed in, competing to be the one to assassinate her, her nurse offered up a girl of the same age, dressed up in royal clothes, to the enemy swords; even as she was being slaughtered this girl did not cry out or say anything to betray who she really was. Harmonia admired her courage and could not bring herself to survive such loyalty. She called the killers back and announced her true identity, so that they turned their slaughter to her.

et in eam certatim ab inimicis impetus fieret, nutrix eius aequalem illi puellam regio cultu ornatam hostilibus gladiis subiecit, quae, ne cum ferro quidem trucidaretur, cuius esset condicionis ediceret proclamavit. admirata illius animum Harmonia et tantae fidei superesse non sustinuit revocatosque interfectores professa quanam esset in caedem suam convertit (Val. Max. 3.2.ext.9).

Harmonia has successfully imitated the courage and loyalty of a slave girl who had allowed herself to be murdered in Harmonia's place, and Valerius' concluding comment draws out the stark difference in their respective behaviour that enacts this successful imitation: 'Therefore for one of them it was a lie that was kept secret that ended her life, for the other it was a truth that was revealed' *ita alteri tectum mendacium, alteri veritas aperta finis vitae fuit* (Val. Max. 3.2.ext.9). In *Letter 66*, Seneca makes a similar point using the exemplum of the siege of Numantia (at which in 133 BCE the besieged inhabitants famously killed themselves and their families

¹⁶ In the first century CE, under the development of imperial rule, the sense of duty towards one's young children is a motivation that becomes more prominent, replacing or complementing the commitment to country and community above one's own family that we have seen as so dominant in archetypal earlier exempla. In fact, under the emperor, the value of patriotism becomes problematic. Nevertheless, we can see that the familiar exemplary structures are still very much in operation here, even when the values that are mobilising are somewhat different. See [Chapter 11](#).

rather than surrender to Scipio's army): 'Scipio is great when he besieges Numantia and compels and forces the enemy to turn their unconquered hands against themselves; but great too is the soul of the besieged, who knows that he is not trapped as long as the road to death is still open, and breathes his last in the embrace of liberty' (Sen. *Ep.* 66.13).

Such examples, and the ancient commentary upon them, make the point that imitation of a heroic deed by no means entails a re-enactment of it; instead it needs to be a process of creative transformation of the original exemplum into a new exemplum that befits the new circumstances. Even the process of imitating a model is not mindless, but requires the operation of critical faculties and the skills of creation and innovation. In response to the challenges of situational and personal variation, Roman exemplary ethics promoted a form of creative imitation, where a moral agent strives to make the virtue his or her own. So, earlier in his chapter on fortitude, Valerius Maximus praises Porcia as a creative imitator of her father, who reproduces his heroic suicide, but outdoes his bravery by devising a new way of killing herself – swallowing hot coals:

All eras follow your purest of flames with admiration that is well-deserved, Porcia, daughter of M. Cato. When you discovered that your husband Brutus had been conquered and killed at Philippi, since you were not equipped with a sword, you did not hesitate to swallow burning coals, imitating the manly death of your father with your woman's spirit. And I am not sure whether your deed is not actually the braver, since you were killed by a new kind of death.

tuos quoque castissimos ignes, Porcia M. Catonis filia, cuncta saecula debita admiratione prosequuntur. quae, cum apud Philippos victum et interemptum virum tuum Brutum cognosces, quia ferrum non dabatur, ardentibus ore carbones haurire non dubitasti, muliebri spiritu virilem patris exitum imitata. sed nescio an hoc fortius, quod ille usitato, tu novo genere mortis absumpta es (Val. Max. 4.6.5).

Indeed, many other exempla and passages from Roman literature convey the importance of originality and breaking the mould in exemplary ethics. We have already seen that 'exceptionality' is a paradoxical quality of exempla, and that qualities such as ingenuity and inventiveness are valued, as they are in the exemplum of Mucius. Roman exemplary ethics inculcates creativity in relation to the application of moral principles. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), it promotes the value of originality and even transgression through the strong emphasis in the Roman tradition on examples of people who break (or change) the rules or go against the grain of general opinion.

Such creative and transformative engagement with exempla through imitation is described by Seneca in his *Letters to Lucilius* as a form of mental ‘digestion’, whereby the moral agent’s mind transforms the exemplary material that it consumes. He ends by recapping the relationship of the imitator and model in terms that recall the debates about *imitatio* in ancient rhetoric. He expresses the dangers of falling short of the model, as a painted portrait does, but also represents successful imitation as a process that results in an autonomous, living individual – a ‘son’ who is different from the model even as he manifests similarities:

Even if there appears a likeness in you of the one whom admiration has caused you to fix on most profoundly [as a model], I want you to be similar to him as a son is, not as a portrait: a portrait is a dead thing . . .

etiam si cuius in te comparebit similitudo quem admiratio tibi altius fixerit, similem esse te volo quomodo filium, non quomodo imaginem: imago res mortua est . . . (Sen. *Ep.* 84.5–8).

Emphasising the need for a creative imitation of the model that results in a living product, a new exemplum, rather than in an inert copy, Seneca draws the same distinction between a more superficial aesthetic mimesis and the successful ethical imitation that results in a fully realised moral agent that we have seen elsewhere. A scene in Silius’ *Punica* perfectly illustrates the bad type of imitation that does not result in the autonomy of the copy that is generated. As the brave mounted warrior Quirinius meets his death on the battlefield, his left arm is severed, and the dead limb is described as going through the motions of the living hand, trying to grip onto the reins, but not actually motivated by any useful intent: ‘it imitated without understanding’ (*imitatur nescia*, Sil. *Pun.* 4.212).

It is perhaps no coincidence that many of the passages cited in the previous discussion articulate the principles of situational sensitivity and situational variability by using exempla that feature female protagonists (Arria, Fannia, Porcia, Harmonia and her slave). For these are the principles embedded in Roman exemplary ethics that enable exempla to be relevant to a diverse community incorporating members of different status.¹⁷ The idea of creative imitation plays an important role in allowing people to engage with exempla even when the protagonist’s situation does not correspond closely with their own, and also, as a corollary to this, in allowing traditional exempla to be ethically relevant to a wide range of

¹⁷ On situational sensitivity in Roman ethics and its relation to social diversity, see briefly Morgan 2007a: 179–182; for further development of Morgan’s ideas, see Langlands 2011.

different kinds of people within Roman culture, knitting them into an ethical system that had relevance across class, geographical and status divides.

Although our ancient texts focus primarily on the ethics and exempla of (powerful) men, and the typical target of exemplary teaching is figured as the aristocratic Roman youth, often urged specifically to live up to the excellence of his own ancestors within a family tradition,¹⁸ nevertheless Roman exemplary ethics expressed a keen awareness of social diversity, and represented itself as an ethics with a broad social compass, where people might engage differently with exempla and with moral ideas depending on where they understood themselves to be located within the Roman hierarchy and in relation to others.¹⁹ It is an important feature of Roman exemplarity that exempla reflect and promote Roman social and political hierarchies, where the free are superior to the slave, the high status to the low, the Roman to the non-Roman, and the male to the female.²⁰ However this by no means exhausts the social and political function or reach of exempla. Individuals from such disempowered or low status groups as women, girls, and slaves are also described as targets of exemplary rhetoric, as well as the heroes of exemplary deeds.²¹

An awareness of such social and moral diversity can be found throughout the work of Valerius Maximus. For instance, in chapter 5.2 'On Gratitude' (*De Grátis*) the first examples of virtuous deeds repaid with gratitude are performed not by men but by women: Veturia, Volumnia, Vestia Oppia and Cluvia Facula. The first story Valerius relates under this heading features Veturia and Volumnia, the mother and wife who persuaded Coriolanus to abandon his plan to attack Rome, and were rewarded by the senate with honours decreed for all Roman *matronae*. Valerius' account emphasises that this is a different kind of patriotic

¹⁸ As we saw in the case of Scipio and Fabius inspired by the portraits of their own ancestors at Sall. *Jug.* 4.5, cited in [Chapter 1](#) and discussed in [Chapter 4](#). See also Baroin 2010. Perhaps this focus on powerful men is unsurprising given that our literature is largely written by and for men of high status; perhaps there were different emphases in other kinds of writings and ethical media, which no longer survive as sources.

¹⁹ Cf. discussion in [Chapter 3](#) of how McDaniel 2011 allows us to see how different social levels can engage differently in the same coherent cultural practices around religion and ethics.

²⁰ Often these social hierarchies are exploited in order to help generate the force of the exemplum: Quintilian explains the rhetorical dynamics of the argument from the greater to the lesser by explaining that it is more persuasive to cite the courageous act of an unnamed, low-status woman if one wants to motivate a man (Quint. *IO* 5.11.9). See further Langlands 2004 on general inequality as powering exemplarity with reference to Sen. *Ad Marc.* 13 and other ancient passages.

²¹ For some preliminary discussion of exemplarity in ancient Rome beyond the elite, see the contributions in Bell and Hanson 2008.

courage from the norm: '[the senate] asserted that the safety of the republic had been found in the matron's dress rather than in weapons' (*confessus plus salutis rei publicae in stola quam in armis fuisse*, 5.2.1). The following story features an even lowlier pair of female heroes – two women from Campania, one a *materfamilias*, Vestia Oppia, and the other, Cluvia Facula, a prostitute – who were rewarded with their freedom for their courageous loyalty (described as their *benevolentia*) to the Roman soldiers during the Second Punic War. Once again Valerius Maximus himself calls attention to their unusually humble status, describing them as 'a pair of extremely humble women' (*duabus humillimis feminis*), and emphasising how extraordinary it was (*mirandum*) that they should be honoured in this way (5.2.2). In the rest of the chapter, generals of high status such as Fabius Maximus Cunctator (5.2.3–4), Scipio Africanus (5.2.5) and Flaminius (5.2.6) rub shoulders with the dregs of society, the *tam contemptum gregem* ('most contemptible gang') of the undertakers who handle the dead for money (5.2.10), and with the most magnificent of foreign kings (Darius, 5.2.ext.1). This chapter is representative of Valerius' scope and attentiveness to operation of power differentials and status, and his awareness that the same virtues (here of benevolence and gratitude) can appear at all levels of society, among all kinds of people, from kings and generals to slaves and scoundrels, manifested in an infinite variety of ways. Across his work as a whole he deals with vices as well as virtues, deeds performed in the heart of the family or on the street as well as on the battlefield or in the civic arena, and his protagonists are slaves, children, foreigners and women, as well as magistrates and generals.

Similar variety is found in a rather different text, Seneca's *Letter 24*, in which the philosopher urges Lucilius to bear life's difficulties with courage (which we encountered in [Chapter 4](#)). Among the inspirational exempla cited in this letter we find both Greeks and Romans, both famous and unnamed, both highborn and lowly, both old and recent. Some of the figures mentioned are truly exceptional people, others are really rather ordinary. Among them we find the legendary hero Mucius Scaevola and, from the more recent history of the first century, a series of high status Roman magistrates: Rutilius the late Republican statesman who steadfastly endured his exile in 92 BCE for the false charge of extortion, and Cato who killed himself at Utica in 46 BCE rather than submit to the command of Caesar. Accompanying these, however, is Scipio, the father-in-law of Pompey, an ordinary man who is in other respects a coward, but also manages to die on Cato's pattern shortly after his model. Further, Seneca also makes reference to an unnamed slave and

an unnamed slave-girl from his own household who died recently without complaint. As he comments: 'Look at our own times, about whose moral lassitude and self-indulgence we complain; they supply people from every social class, every lot in life, every age, who have cut short their own misfortunes with death' (*respice ad haec nostra tempora, de quorum languore ac delicis querimur: omnis ordinis homines suggerent, omnis fortunae, omnis aetatis, qui mala sua morte praeciderint*, *Ep.* 24.11). Variety explicitly plays its rhetorical role here, as a way of communicating the idea that even the lowest of slaves, even the most uneducated of soldiers, have despised pain and death, so that a man such as Lucilius, trained in philosophy, should consider it easy for himself to do so, too. However, beyond its specific rhetorical force, this variety also reflects the variety found among the exemplary tales circulated in ancient Rome. While powerful men from leading families may often lead the way in heroism and virtue in Roman exemplary ethics, these qualities are not restricted to the highest ranks; this idea is also expressed explicitly in a number of ancient texts.²² Such collections of multiple and diverse exempla indicate the variety of potential exemplary figures that are available to a Roman moral learner, from the ordinary folk within one's own household to the greatest national heroes of history.

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This common practice of presenting exempla of a particular moral quality as multiple and various conveys the idea that each virtue or abstract concept has breadth, and that within this breadth one finds diversity. Sequences of exempla such as those we find in Valerius Maximus or Seneca can map out the conceptual 'space' occupied by a virtue. This idea of virtue as possessing a 'breadth' encompassing variety corresponds to ideas found in Aristotle's discussion of moral learning, and especially to Aristotle's 'central doctrine of the mean' as elaborated by Rosalind Hursthouse.²³ In what follows I draw on Hursthouse's interpretation of Aristotle's writings for my own articulation of Roman exemplary ethics, which seems to me to have many points of similarity. For Aristotle, a virtuous act falls within a certain compass of a virtue, a space that is delineated partly by its boundaries with the corresponding vices, situated as it is between the extremes of excess and deficiency.²⁴

²² E.g. Val. Max. 3.3.ext.7, Sall. *Jug.* 85, Cato *Origines*; Cic. *Sest.* 101–102.

²³ Hursthouse 2006. I am very grateful to Chris Gill for directing me to Hursthouse's work and for discussing with me the ideas that follow here.

²⁴ Ar. *NE* 2.6.(1106b36–1107a5).

Thus, courage is bounded on the one hand by cowardice and on the other hand by rashness. As we have seen, Roman exemplary ethics often draws attention to this by positioning exempla on these boundaries between virtues and their related vices, and using them to encourage ethical reflection. According to Hursthouse, Aristotle envisions the space that is occupied by a particular virtue as the 'bull's-eye' at the centre of a target. The larger circle that surrounds the bull's-eye encompasses the many ways in which one can deviate from true virtue and miss the mark. However, the bull's-eye itself is also a space – a much smaller space that is much harder to hit, but within its boundaries there is room for more than one way to be virtuous. This then corresponds to the idea of variety within a defined area that is mapped out by collections or sequences of exempla, such as those found in the works of Valerius Maximus or Seneca. The more social variety within a single sequence, the more inclusive the representation of the ethics.

However, the operation of situational variability in this context has further precision. In Aristotelian ethical theory there are many ways in which virtue might play out in general, and many different ways of being brave or generous or just. However, in a specific situation and for a specific individual there is only one way to be truly virtuous, and only one point within this bull's-eye where one may hit home. This is what is intended by Aristotle's idea that each person must aim for the 'mean relative to you'; in Hursthouse's convincing interpretation, the 'mean' corresponds to the bull's-eye, within which space different circumstances will require one to hit a particular and very precise point.²⁵

Hursthouse's bull's-eye space, then, corresponds to what is marked out by Roman exempla; virtuous exempla represent acts that fall within this target area. It is a space that is hard to hit, but there is not only one way to hit it right; the right spot in any given case will depend on individual circumstances. It is hard to distinguish this spot from the rest of the target around it, with its many opportunities for vice and failure. Moreover, Aristotle lays emphasis on the sensitivity to particular circumstances that are needed to identify where your own bull's-eye is in a given situation; an act is only virtuous in relation to a range of different factors all of which need to be in alignment.²⁶ Virtue, in this context, lies not in correctly applying rules but in correctly identifying one's target. According to Hursthouse, one of the central insights of the central doctrine of the mean is that one should start 'by training children, not

²⁵ Aristotle *NE* 2.9 (1109b19–21) and 4.5 (1126a31–b4). ²⁶ Aristotle *NE* 3.7 (1115b20).

to follow general rules, but to recognise their central target in particular circumstances.²⁷ The particular faculties needed to identify the area of the target, and also the specific spot within that area where one's own act should fall, include those that are most prominent in Roman exemplarity: the ability to distinguish between similar or similar-looking acts of virtue and vice, whose appearance can be deceptive, and sensitivity to particular circumstances.²⁸ In both Aristotelian ethics and Roman exemplary ethics, situational sensitivity helps one to relate particular exempla to one's own life, and also to locate where one's own spot on the bull's-eye must be. Having an eye for the right thing to do is crucial for Aristotle,²⁹ but it is Roman exemplary ethics that provides the moral agent with the copious resources required to develop this 'eye'. Roman exempla do not solve the problem of how to perceive virtue accurately, any more than Aristotle's theory does, but they do at least offer a pragmatic tool for honing the necessary ethical skills, enabling one to flex and exercise one's ethical muscles, working through difficult dilemmas.

In this respect Roman exemplary ethics makes a new contribution to virtue ethics and an advance on Aristotelian ethics, by putting it into action, working it through with specific examples, and formulating its central principles through narrative structures and particular stories that can be easily disseminated and absorbed. With its insistence on sensitivity to particular circumstances, on critical thinking, and on the production of a critical, independent moral agent, all rooted in a shared communal resource of particular stories, Roman exemplary ethics can be seen as a practical, culturally embedded version of a very similar process of ethical development to that theorised by Aristotle. However, Aristotle's virtue ethics is only articulated in the abstract, at the theoretical level. What Roman exemplary ethics brings to this are the particulars themselves. These are a whole host of exemplary tales and figures that can be used to communicate values and principles to members of the community, to test out abstract principles and concepts, and to aid in the practical implementation of these values and principles.

This is also an ethics that is embedded in Roman culture so that its reach goes far beyond the practice of philosophy, into the everyday practical

²⁷ Hursthouse 2006: 114.

²⁸ See Ar. *NE* 3.7. Cf. McDowell 1998: 52–53 on Aristotelian ethics, where virtue is described as 'reliable sensitivity' and 'an ability to recognise requirements that situations impose on one's behaviour'.

²⁹ *NE* 6.12–13; see also Sherman 1989: 13–55 and Sherman 1997: 239–283.

ethics of Roman life. In the [next chapter](#) we will see how the community consensus surrounding exempla further facilitates their range of functions in Roman culture, from basic learning to high-level philosophy, enabling them to provide the kind of multifaceted resource that McDaniel describes in his study of Thai Buddhism.

Working Consensus around Roman Exempla

In previous chapters we have seen that exemplary stories did not cease to be of use to one's moral development even after the years of formal and formative education were over and one was familiar with the fundamental essence of virtue and vice. Rather, although the nature of the moral learning that it facilitated would inevitably change over the course of a lifetime, the exemplum continued to be a moral touchstone for Roman adults, one that anyone might find useful from time to time: in thinking through and coming to a better understanding of tricky moral issues or in helping them to deal with difficult times and decisions in their own lives, in constructing philosophical argument or in devising strategy on the battlefield. As a body of stories, exempla were an extraordinarily rich resource in which a body of stories and a generic form of moral narrative are unified within an overarching interpretative framework that allows the stories to play a range of functions within moral learning and thinking: creating aspiration, modeling excellent behaviour, promoting self-reflection, enabling epistemological progress, testing precepts and assumptions, honing moral judgment and exploring complex ethical ideas.

One of the striking aspects of Roman exemplary ethics is the level of public exposure and communal consensus that the stories command in Roman culture, celebrated as they are in public monuments and spaces around the city, in private houses, in public events such as aristocratic funerals and widely circulated as they are in literature of all genres and registers, including epic poetry, oratory, history, satire, philosophical treatises and inscriptions on tombstones.¹ The concept of people learning core life skills from the observation and imitation of others within their community is a familiar one to us today; in some cultural settings this may be

¹ See Edwards 1996 on the way the buildings and monuments of the city of Rome make copious reference to exemplary stories; Walter 2004: 131–154 on public material commemoration of *exempla* Rome; Flower 1996 on ancestral *imagines* and their social role in public funerals and display; Walter 2004: 89–130 on aristocratic modes of commemoration; Jaeger 2002.

formalised through such institutions as apprenticeships or within teaching methods where instructors demonstrate in front of student, or provide them with models to follow. However, what is notable about Roman culture is that the exemplary figures were shared so widely throughout the community; the heroes and their deeds were celebrated publicly and their stories were known and told by everyone and were common currency, much in the way that fairy-tales are today (although they constituted a very different cultural resource from that of fairy-tales in contemporary Western societies). And it was not just the stories themselves that were shared and transmitted through the generations; the moral values with which the stories are associated are also very explicitly agreed through public consensus. Thus, Roman exemplary ethics might be understood as the public rendition and expression of a process that in many cultures operates on a more personal and individual level (and in Rome operated on this level as well), through personal exemplars and models of behaviour.² Roman exempla were subject to communal consensus – they were presented and transmitted as the stories that are judged to be valuable by and for the community – and as a result learning about them bound one into a common identity as well as into a shared moral system.³ The moral function of exempla relies on there being a consensus surrounding these stories, both about their content and about their significance as morally valuable tales that everybody ought to know. This chapter will explore this consensus and its implications. Although Roman exempla were a powerful means of persuasion and education, their power depended on the negotiated consensus that determined their significance, or at least framed its production, and this dependence renders their moral significance simultaneously fragile. Consensus, therefore, incorporated a degree of indeterminacy about the significance of exemplary deeds and their specific value, and we will explore the relation between consensus and indeterminacy further in the [following chapter](#).

This chapter considers Roman exempla as a shared ethical resource around which a working consensus has been established within the community (and continues to be established and amended over time), which enables communication about moral ideas. From this perspective, we can understand exemplary stories as a means of acculturation and a route to understanding the shared values and moral reference points of the

² On the process of learning from exemplars, see McDowell 1998, Warnick 2008. On ancient exempla used at the personal level, see further Langlands 2014, Langlands [forthcoming](#) and Bernstein 2008.

³ For a comparable instance of shared exemplars contributing towards development of identity in communities, see Gayer and Therwath 2010 on role models in contemporary South Asia.

community. In the discussion of cultural memory in the following chapters we will find the idea that exempla are a form of mandatory cultural knowledge; in order to belong to the community a member is expected to know these stories and grasp their cultural value, and it is this shared knowledge that enables members of the community to participate in discussion of moral ideas with one another. It is their status as culturally valuable that enables exempla to function as shared reference points that facilitate discussion across the community and at range of different levels, from basic cognitive learning, to high level philosophical exploration.

There are some similarities between Roman exemplary ethics and the ‘exemplarist virtue theory’ recently proposed by philosopher Linda Zagzebski (Zagzebski 2010). Her theorisation of the role of exemplars in contemporary Christian culture offers a more widely applicable model for approaching the analysis of the role of exemplars in ethics.⁴ In this theory, our knowledge and understanding of virtue come from empirical investigation of moral exemplars and exemplary narratives.⁵ One value of conveying abstract concepts in this way, through particular examples, is that it provides a means for allowing people to have a working understanding of concepts without needing to have understood them at a profound philosophical level. Indeed, some approaches to the understanding of how examples function within moral reasoning might even propose that this process can work without the need for the abstract concept itself to have an existence that predates the specific exempla. Zagzebski articulates this by analogy with the theory of ‘direct reference’ as developed in the context of scientific investigation, where people can know, for example, what ‘gold’ is, and speak about gold, without relying on a description, and without knowing, for instance, anything about its molecular structure or about what distinguishes it from other elements at that level.⁶ Just so, Zagzebski suggests, ‘basic moral concepts are anchored in exemplars of moral goodness, direct reference to which are foundational in the theory. Good persons are persons *like that*, just as gold is stuff *like that*. Picking out exemplars can fix the reference of the term “good person” without the use of descriptive concepts. It is not necessary that ordinary people engaged in

⁴ It is applied, for example, by Amy Olberding to her study of Confucius’ *Analects* (Olberding 2012).

⁵ In Zagzebski’s account, learning from examples is pre-theoretical, or perhaps, as in the case of the Buddhist stories discussed in Chapter 2, it is helpful to think of the process as paratheoretical; see also the discussion in Olberding 2012, drawing on and expanding Zagzebski 2010.

⁶ ‘We may not know the nature of gold, its deep structure, and for millennia nobody did, but that did not prevent people from defining “gold” in a way that fixed the reference of the term and continued to do so after it was discovered what distinguishes gold from other elements’ (Zagzebski 2010: 50).

moral practice know the nature of good persons – what makes them good. In fact, it is not necessary that anybody know what makes a good person good in order to successfully refer to good persons.⁷ For instance, as we saw in the [previous chapter](#), reading Valerius Maximus' chapter and sequence of exempla on bravery, one can reach an understanding that the figures described there are brave, and get a sense of what bravery looks like and how it might be enacted, without necessarily being in a position to give a clear account of what bravery is which is independent of those particular exempla.⁸

In Zagzebski's formulation, moral exemplars (people who have been identified by the community as morally exceptional in some way) enable us to talk about virtue without needing to have established definitively at a theoretical level what virtue is and without relying on a description of virtue. In the Roman context, the exempla of Fabricius and Horatius Cocles in Seneca's letter to Lucilius, for instance (*Ep.* 120, see [Chapter 4](#)), can be understood to function in a similar way to the exemplary narratives discussed by Zagzebski, as a referent that we can point to when we want to explain to a child, for instance, that virtue is 'like that'. There is no need to explain or label their deeds any further, and their stories can be informative about virtue (or about patriotism or courage) without any need for us to attempt to further define or describe those qualities.

It is significant that such shared exemplars can enable people with very different levels of knowledge about a subject to talk meaningfully to one another about that subject. To develop the example offered by Michael Putnam and discussed by Zagzebski, it is possible to talk about elm trees and know what an elm tree is without being able to recognise one, but the person who lives with elm trees at the bottom of her garden will be in a better position to talk knowledgeably about them, and the botanist may be at a greater advantage still – at least in certain conversations.⁹ Similarly, there are many different levels of knowledge that one can have about

⁷ Zagzebski 2010: 51.

⁸ We may relate this to the special capacity of stories, as discussed in [Chapter 2](#).

⁹ 'It is an important part of the theory of direct reference that a person can successfully refer when she is not good at identifying the referent herself, and even when she has never had any experience of the referent. So we all can refer to uranium, and Putnam says he can refer to elm trees even though he is not good at recognizing them. Nonetheless, those of us who are only distantly related to uranium or elm trees are epistemically disadvantaged relative to the experts who are good at identifying them. We lack the understanding that the experts have. But given the importance of moral understanding by as many people as possible in a moral community, it is important that the ability to identify exemplars is spread as widely as possible. This is one of the functions of narrative mentioned below' (Zagzebski 2010: 51, n. 6).

virtue, as Zagzebski emphasises, and this is also an important feature of Roman exemplary ethics (with further parallels to the Buddhist ethics studied by Hallisey and Hansen discussed in [Chapter 2](#)). These are all coherent ethical systems, in which concrete exempla or exemplars or stories enable people within a single but diverse culture, with different levels of moral understanding and philosophical knowledge, to work together and talk to one another. Roman exempla were able to generate and sustain a shared moral language accessible at a wide range of philosophical levels; the more widely shared the examples, the more coherent the conversation.

Zagzebski argues that such use of exemplars and exemplary narratives in everyday ethical learning and discussion is fundamental to contemporary Christian ethics. She writes: ‘Practices of picking out such persons are already embedded in our moral practices. We learn through narratives of both fictional and non-fictional persons that some people are admirable and worth imitating, and the identification of these persons is one of the pre-theoretical aspects of our moral practices that theory must explain. Moral learning, like most other forms of learning, is principally done by imitation. Exemplars are those persons who are *most imitable*, and they are most imitable because they are most admirable. We identify admirable persons by the emotion of admiration, and that emotion is itself subject to education through the example of the emotional reactions of other persons.’¹⁰ As we have seen, admiration and emotional engagement are important features of Roman exemplarity too. Our understanding of how Roman exempla work and how they blend emotion and moral reasoning is further enhanced by the application of insights from studies of admiration from modern psychology; exempla integrate reasoning with emotional factors in a way that parallels the findings of recent experiments in neuroscience suggesting that emotional states are influential on the process of making judgments about social situations.¹¹

Important in relation to my discussion of Roman ethics and exempla is Zagzebski’s assertion that the relationship of a moral exemplar to abstract virtue is not rigid or fixed, and also that while an exemplar may help one to grasp what virtue is, it does not pin down its nature definitively: ‘For the same reason, when we say that a good person is a person like that, and we directly refer to St. Francis of Assisi, or to Confucius, or to Jesus Christ, we are implicitly leaving open the question of what properties of Francis, Confucius, or Christ are essential to their goodness. Perhaps there are non-evaluative descriptions of these persons that are sufficient to determine

¹⁰ Zagzebski [2010](#): 51–52. ¹¹ Peterson et al. [2010](#): 143.

their moral goodness; perhaps not. Perhaps their goodness is not determined by any descriptive properties we know how to apply. The exemplarist approach has the advantage that neither these metaphysical matters nor substantive matters about what makes a person good need be settled at the outset.¹² This is a very helpful way of conceptualising the relationship between an example and the abstract quality that it exemplifies, and Zagzebski's insight here is highly pertinent for our study of Roman *exempla*. The nature of the relationship between the specific example and the general category has preoccupied philosophers for centuries, and, more specifically, has often posed challenges in the context of Roman *exempla*.¹³ Zagzebski's suggestion that exemplars are pre-theoretical does not solve the problem, but it provides a helpful framework for approaching it. In addition this formulation makes allowance for the tricky 'flexibility' of *exempla* which will be discussed in the [following chapter](#). As Zagzebski asserts: 'This theory is compatible with the possibility that paradigmatically good individuals are only contingently good, and it is also compatible with the theory that our identification of exemplars is revisable.'¹⁴

By the time Romans reach adulthood, this body of exemplary stories is so deeply embedded in their minds by years of declamation, speeches, literature and other cultural practices, as to constitute cliché. As familiar as the plots and key motifs of traditional fairy-tales are for adults today ('Who's been sitting in *my* chair . . .?'), moral *exempla* also had the same potential to feel like stories that one could outgrow. In *Letter 24* Seneca imagines Lucilius protesting at his use of familiar, well-worn *exempla*. Lucilius' protest is in response to another colourful and emotive retelling of the *exemplum* of Mucius (after those of Rutilius, Metellus and Socrates) intended to reassure Lucilius that he will be capable of enduring the consequences of his lawsuit:

Mucius put his hand into the flames. It is agony to burn: how much more agonising when you are inflicting the suffering on yourself! You see that an uneducated person, equipped with no philosophical teachings against death or pain, only trained in military strength, inflicted punishment on himself for his unsuccessful attempt. He stood there as a spectator of his right hand as it disintegrated in the enemy's hearth, and he did not remove the hand melting from the naked bones until he was dragged away from the flames by the enemy himself. He might have done something more beneficial in that

¹² Zagzebski 2010: 52–53. ¹³ Cf. the discussion by Roller 2015a about *exempla* and categories.

¹⁴ Zagzebski 2010: 52.

encampment, but nothing braver. See how much keener virtue is to engage with dangers than cruelty is to inflict them: Porsenna forgave Mucius more readily for wanting to kill him than Mucius forgave himself for failing to kill him.

Mucius ignibus manum imposuit. acerbum est uri: quanto acerbius si id te faciente patiaris! vides hominem non eruditum nec ullis praeceptis contra mortem aut dolorem subornatum, militari tantum robore instructum, poenas a se irriti conatus exigentem; spectator destillantis in hostili foculo dexteræ stetit nec ante removit nudis ossibus fluentem manum quam ignis illi ab hoste subductus est. facere aliquid in illis castris felicius potuit, nihil fortius. vide quanto acrior sit ad occupanda pericula virtus quam crudelitas ad irroganda: facilius Porsina Mucio ignovit quod voluerat occidere quam sibi Mucius quod non occiderat (Sen. *Ep.* 24.5).

Lucilius is imagined as immediately responding:

‘These are just the fables that are droned out in every schoolroom; in a moment, when you get to the subject of “scorning death” you’ll be telling me the story of Cato.’

‘decantatae’ . . . ‘in omnibus scholis fabulae istae sunt; iam mihi, cum ad contemnendam mortem ventum fuerit, Catonem narrabis’ (Sen. *Ep.* 24.6).

However, both in his response here, and elsewhere in his letters to Lucilius and his other philosophical works, Seneca makes it clear that exempla had a role to play in grown-up sophisticated discourse, as well. Seneca does indeed go on to use Cato’s exemplum in the letter, but the point he makes here explicitly is that such familiar and clichéd exempla, precisely *because* they are so familiar and can be taken as shared reference points, can be used as stepping stones to a new level of ethical thinking.¹⁵ They provide an element of shared knowledge (working consensus) and a shared moral language that can be taken for granted and can provide a stable starting point for discussion. Seneca’s treatment of exempla demonstrates just how useful exempla are as aids to philosophical thinking, as we will see in the following discussion which explores how Seneca uses the exemplum of Mucius as a springboard for some probing philosophical discussion.¹⁶

We have seen that in *Letter 24* Seneca uses his abbreviated reference to Mucius’ story as an example of the ability to withstand pain that ought to

¹⁵ For earlier discussion of Seneca’s philosophical use of exempla, see Mayer 1991; Roller 2001, chapter 2; Inwood 2007; Roller 2015b.

¹⁶ For another illustration of this in operation, see my analysis of Cicero’s *De finibus* and the deployment of the exemplum of T. Manlius Torquatus at the start of Chapter 12.

strengthen Lucilius' own resolve.¹⁷ Here I will show how the working consensus surrounding Mucius can also be used as a foundation for moving towards advanced and critical ethical thinking. On more than one occasion Seneca takes Mucius' exemplum as the starting point or backdrop for discussion of more complex ideas, primarily variations on the central Stoic theme of what counts as 'good' and what in life should be sought out for its own sake and what avoided.¹⁸ In *Letter* 66, his main theme is the challenging question of how all 'goods' can be considered equally valuable when there are different kinds of goods, some of which are to be sought out (such as joy and peace) and some of which are to be avoided (such as endurance of torture or of serious illness).¹⁹ The main body of the letter is devoted to the argument that there is no difference (in terms of virtue) between joys and the noble suffering of intolerable pain (*Ep.* 66.14):

'What then?' [asks the puzzled imaginary interlocutor], 'Is there no difference between experiencing joy and intolerable pain?' None, [comes the answer], as far as their virtues are concerned. There is a great deal of difference between them in terms of the ways that the virtues are manifested; for in one case there is the natural relaxation and rest of the soul, in the other there is pain which is against nature. Therefore, those things that have a big difference between them are "intermediates"; virtue is the same in both. The material does not change the virtue: harsh and difficult circumstances do not make it worse and happy and cheerful circumstances do not make it better; therefore, it must be equal.

'quid ergo? nihil interest inter gaudium et dolorum inflexibilem patientiam?' nihil, quantum ad ipsas virtutes: plurimum inter illa in quibus virtus utraque ostenditur; in altero enim naturalis est animi remissio ac laxitas, in altero contra naturam dolor. itaque media sunt haec quae plurimum intervalli recipiunt: virtus in utroque par est. virtutem materia non mutat: nec peiorem facit dura ac difficilis nec meliorem hilaris et laeta; necessest ergo par sit (*Ep.* 66.14–15).

A little later the imaginary interlocutor interrupts again: 'Are you really trying to tell us that there is no difference between someone who is rejoicing and someone who is being tortured on the rack?' (*Ep.* 66.18).

The Mucius exemplum (which may well have been in the reader's mind already, given its fame and prominence in Roman tradition) is introduced only in the last paragraphs of this lengthy letter (66.51–53), but there is

¹⁷ See [Chapter 4](#). ¹⁸ See *Epp.* 24.5, 66.52–53, 71, 76.20–21; *Prov.* 3.5.

¹⁹ Sen. *Ep.* 66.5–6. This is a key issue for Stoicism and a subject of complex discussion in several ancient works.

a twist. It is not cited in order to support this Stoic argument (as it will be elsewhere in Seneca's oeuvre),²⁰ but rather to complicate the whole argument with a bit of counterfactual speculation. 'Allow me, Lucilius you excellent man, to claim something bolder: if it *were* possible for some "goods" to be greater than others, I think that actually it would be those ones that seem harsher that I would prefer to the softer and more pleasurable ones; *those* would be the ones I would call greater' (*permitte mihi, Lucili virorum optime, aliquid audacius dicere: si ulla bona maiora esse aliis possent, haec ego quae tristia videntur mollibus illis et delicatis praetulissem, haec maiora dixissem*, Sen. Ep. 66.49). This little thought experiment might threaten to undermine his previous argument that all goods are equal, were it not (as Inwood points out) that the whole passage is strictly hypothetical.²¹ The case of Mucius is then cited to make the point that the greatest praise will be given to the deeds that are undertaken in the greatest adversity; it is adversity that puts heroism to the test:

Would I hesitate to praise Mucius' famous stump and charred hand more highly than the unharmed hand of some other hero? He stood fast in scorn of both the enemy and of the flames and looked on as his own hand disintegrated in the enemy's hearth, until Porsenna, whose punishment he was enjoying, became envious of his glory and ordered him to be pulled away from the fire against his will. This good, surely, I would rate among the primary goods [i.e. those that are to be sought after] and I would think that it was greater than goods that are safe and untried by fortune, just as it is more exceptional to conquer an enemy with a missing hand than to conquer the enemy with a hand holding a weapon? 'Really?' you say, 'Will you wish for this good for yourself?' Why not? For if someone is unable even to *wish* to do the deed, he will not be able to do the deed itself. Or would I rather wish that I might hold out my hand to have my knuckles moisturised by my toy-boys? So that some little woman – or men dressed as women – should stroke my fingers? Would I not consider Mucius more fortunate, because he treated the fire as if he *were* holding out his hand for a massage? He redeemed whatever mistakes he had made; he waged war unarmed and maimed, and with that stump for a hand he conquered two kings. Goodbye.

ego dubitem quin magis laudem truncam illam et retorridam manum Mucii quam cuiuslibet fortissimi salvam? stetit hostium flammaramque contemptor et manum suam in hostili foculo destillantem perspectavit,

²⁰ *Epp.* 24.5, 71.

²¹ In his commentary on the letter, Brad Inwood stresses that this section is explicitly counterfactual and constitutes stepping away from the main argument, and that Seneca is 'careful to bracket out this conclusion so as to maintain orthodoxy on the main point of the letter' (Inwood 2007: 179).

donec Porsina cuius poenae favebat gloriae invidit et ignem invito eripi iussit. hoc bonum quidni inter prima numerem tantoque maius putem quam illa secuta et intemptata fortunae quanto rarius est hostem amissa manu vicisse quam armata? ‘quid ergo?’ inquis ‘hoc bonum tibi optabis?’ quidni? hoc enim nisi qui potest et optare, non potest facere. an potius optem ut malaxandos articulos exoletis meis porrigam? ut muliercula aut aliquis in mulierculam ex viro versus digitulos meos ducat? quidni ego feliciorum putem Mucium, quod sic tractavit ignem quasi illam manum tractatori praestitisset? in integrum restituit quidquid erraverat: confecit bellum inermis ac mancus et illa manu trunca reges duos vicit. vale (Sen. *Ep.* 66.52–53).

The final *vale* (‘goodbye’) indicates that this passage is the resounding climax of this letter, the point where Seneca signs off to leave Lucilius reflecting on what he has said, his head brimming with vivid images of Mucius brandishing his horribly charred hand and of his moral counterpart, the corrupt sensualist who prefers to lounge around getting manicures from grotesque unnatural creatures. The point is counterintuitive; Seneca claims he would choose to suffer terrible pain rather than to enjoy exquisite pleasure, because the pain will allow scope for virtue, whereas the pleasure is associated with moral weakness. The common consensus about Mucius’ admirable heroism is brought in to complicate the picture and challenge our intuitions about which situation is to be preferred. For who among the Romans could deny that it would be preferable to be the hero Mucius than to be his degenerate, pleasure-seeking counterpart? Seneca makes this point explicitly in *De providentia* (3.5), as we shall see. If one has signed up to the working consensus surrounding the exempla tradition and this particular exemplary hero, it is hard to avoid coming to this conclusion.²²

In a similar fashion Seneca uses Mucius in his treatise on providence (*De providentia*) to turn on their head assumptions about what is good and to be sought out in life, with another startling juxtaposition of ideas and a provocative question: should one be counted happier when one is fondling one’s lover’s breast, or when one is burning one’s hand in a fire?

Is Mucius unfortunate because he pressed his hand into the enemy’s flames, and punished himself for his own mistake, because he routed with his charred hand the king whom he had been unable to defeat with his hand

²² On the idea that one must sign up to this if one wishes to be part of the community, see [Chapter 8](#) on mandatory cultural knowledge.

armed? Well? Would he have been more fortunate if he had been nestling his hand in his girlfriend's breast?

infelix est Mucius quod dextra ignes hostium premit et ipse a se exigit erroris sui poenas, quod regem quem armata manu non potuit exusta fugat? quid ergo? felicius esset, si in sinu amicae foveret manum? (Sen. *Prov.* 3.5).

Instinctively the untutored mind thinks in terms of physical sensation, and the common sense answer seems to be that one would prefer the former's sensual pleasure to the latter's agonising pain (as in case of *Ep.* 66, where it is the assumption of the interlocutor in that final passage). However, the moral charge of these stories, derived from their status within the *exempla* tradition, insists that we reverse this assumption.

As these passages suggest, Seneca makes use of Mucius' *exemplum* and of other traditional *exempla* especially in cases where he is mounting an offensive against common sense.²³ In other words, it is precisely where he is challenging his readers' assumptions and asking them to change the way they think so as to take on board a paradoxical Stoic precept, that he makes most use of those comforting and familiar stories about which we can all agree. As I discuss elsewhere in this book, Cicero deploys *exempla* in a similar fashion in his philosophical works.²⁴ Requiring the reader's prior agreement about the moral value of the story, as they do, these *exempla* can then be used as tools to pry the reader away from their adherence to more abstract ethical principles. In these philosophical works, Seneca repeatedly asks his readers to assent to claims about Mucius that appear to be part of the shared understanding about what Mucius did and what he represents. He appeals to the established working consensus surrounding Mucius, which is not necessarily described in detail in this text itself, but merely implied, since Seneca can assume that his readers will bring this common knowledge to bear upon their interpretation of his argument.²⁵ What this common knowledge or 'established consensus' might consist of, and the methodological problems involved in reconstructing it, will be the subject of extensive discussion in [Chapter 8](#) and [9](#). For now, it is enough to say that it is clear that the arguments of writers such as Seneca and Cicero

²³ As Inwood describes them, cf. Inwood 2007 on *Letters* 76.

²⁴ See e.g. the use of *exempla* in the *Paradoxa* and in *De finibus*, especially Torquatus in books 1 and 2, discussed at the start of [Chapter 12](#).

²⁵ Cf. Heikkinen on the 'known story' of Mucius that lies behind Seneca's arguments (Heikkinen 1997: 64), and Edwards' assertion that: 'a familiarity with this story in its context – in particular Livy's version of the story – adds another dimension to Seneca's arresting picture' (Edwards 2007: 94), as well as Inwood's suggestion that in *Ep.* 66 Lucilius/the reader is invited to draw a comparison between Mucius and Claranus that relies on knowledge of aspects of the Mucius story that are external to the text itself (Inwood 2007: 178).

would not have worked unless their readers and audiences were prepared to participate in the agreement about the moral significance of these traditional exempla.²⁶ Here I propose that the core of the consensus must be the agreement that it is a morally edifying story at all, and one that has a heroic deed at its heart.²⁷ We can go further and say that Romans must have taken for granted too its association with an entwined cluster of certain specific virtues related to bravery, patriotism and physical endurance.

As we have seen, using exempla (whether in emulation, political argument or philosophical discourse) requires a level of working consensus about what the important virtues are, which historical figures are to be revered as exempla, what the exemplary tales are and what virtues and morals they convey. Roman writers are able to make certain assumptions about what their audiences and readers will think of when they hear the name, both in terms of details of the story and in terms of the values associated with it. In the tradition, Mucius is established as a hero, who, as a historical figure, is to be venerated. Although the story may vary from account to account, the tradition as a whole contains certain details that are more or less secure: the siege of Rome by the Etruscans, the attempted assassination of Porsenna, the burning hand, and the admiring response of Porsenna. These core details and the central evaluation of Mucius' deed as heroism represent the 'consensus' surrounding the story-tradition.

However, Seneca also manipulates this shared story. Note, for example, how he describes in *Letter* 66 the familiar moment where Porsenna pulls Mucius away from the fire. Here Seneca supports his own point about the 'desirability' of Mucius' position through the subtle characterisation of the protagonists' motives. Mucius is described as dragged from the altar 'against his will' (*invitus*). In the context of other accounts of the story, such as those we have encountered in earlier chapters, this adjective would not make sense: if we understand Mucius' main aim here to be the strategic one of rescuing a dire situation, then he ought to be relieved and delighted when Porsenna pulls him out of the fire. By slipping in this adjective, Seneca suggests that Mucius' primary commitment is to the endurance of pain itself. Seneca calls him 'unwilling' in order to sneakily transform him

²⁶ However, we may notice that in *Ep.* 71.17 Seneca feels the need to state explicitly that this is something about which we can all agree, which might arouse our suspicions that Seneca may not merely be drawing on an existing consensus, but may also be establishing that consensus through his text, or, at the very least, attempting to coerce his reader to join an established consensus. For more on the issue of mandatory and invented consensus, see in [Chapter 5](#), on Cic. *Sest.*

²⁷ This is implied of Mucius in Cicero's *Paradoxa* too, as well as at many other places in his philosophical works.

(without any real violence to the traditional story) into the kind of super-Stoic that he is introducing in this coda to *Letter 66* – a man who *relishes* the opportunity to suffer pain, a man who is positively *irritated* when the opportunity is over. Furthermore, Porsenna is described here as envious (*invidit*), as if he wishes *he* were in Mucius' position; even the enemy is represented as buying into this Stoic approach. Granted, Porsenna is described as envious of Mucius' glory, rather than his suffering per se, but the implication that he would like to be in Mucius' shoes is another gentle nudge towards the idea that such suffering of pain could be considered a primary good, to be sought for its own sake. With these phrases, we see Seneca tinker almost imperceptibly with elements of the agreed tradition to enhance the function of this exemplum within his argument. He thereby also works towards modifying the working consensus, rendering it, perhaps, increasingly rich.²⁸ Seneca is able to generate new Stoic interpretations of traditional material because of the inherent indeterminacy that is incorporated within the consensus, which renders exempla a remarkably flexible resource, amenable to amendments and to moulding according to the needs of different situations. This 'indeterminacy' is the subject of the [following chapter](#), where it will be argued that the dynamic interplay between consensus and indeterminacy fundamentally underpins the ethical function of Roman exempla.

²⁸ [Chapter 8](#) develops the idea that we should think of such a story-tradition as a heterogeneous and changing 'site of exemplarity', where the working consensus evolves alongside shifting cultural and social priorities.

*Indeterminacy of Exempla: Interpretation,
Motivation and Improvisation*

So far I have been treating the story-tradition of Mucius Scaevola as if it were a single version of the story, and I have glossed over differences in the sources, as if the details were more or less agreed upon, in order to emphasise what I have called the ‘working consensus’ surrounding the story. I have proceeded as if Mucius’ deed embodied a cluster of virtues and qualities that we can agree upon (patriotism, endurance, courage, ingenuity), and as if the different sources in which they appear might emphasise one or other of these more emphatically, or draw out different implications, but the central elements and their significance remain the same across the sources. In this chapter, however, I am going to focus on the fact that certain aspects of the story are actually interpreted and evaluated differently in different sources. This is true even of this particular story, which is a relatively ‘stable’ one, as exempla go, showing relatively little variation in detail over time and between sources.¹ I will use these variations in interpretation of the Mucius exemplum as a starting point to explore one of the central features of the tradition – the fundamental moral indeterminacy of exempla. This indeterminacy works in tandem with the working consensus, and enhances the capacity of shared exempla to facilitate ethical thinking.

The basic idea that the meaning of each exemplum is not fixed but rather flexible and open to interpretation and reinterpretation has been increasingly recognised and acknowledged over the last decade or so. Exemplary stories convey different meanings in different contexts, and are used to convey different moral messages in support of different arguments. Especially important in establishing this idea has been the excellent monograph by Jane Chaplin, *Livy’s Exemplary History*, which explores the

¹ The much more obvious variation within, and openness to interpretation of, many other exempla (such as the stories of Regulus, Horatius, Torquatus, among others) will be discussed in detail in [Chapters 12 and 13](#).

way that Livy's characters are represented as deploying historical exempla in their speeches and decision-making, and shows how the same exempla are deployed to different ends by different people in different contexts and how their significance and efficacy evolves over the span of time that Livy is narrating.² Livy is shown to be representing in his history a flexibility that is also a feature of historical exempla more generally, as scholars have noted.³ However, the implication of this flexibility for exempla's ethical, rhetorical and literary function has not yet been addressed in full, and is one of the central themes of this book.

The acknowledged flexibility of exempla seems on the face of it to pose a problem for the efficacy of exempla in particular contexts. An exemplum, when deployed in a speech or argument, is required to convey a clear moral message that is instantly accessible and upon which all can agree. For instance, when Cicero cites the exemplum of Mucius in his speech in defence of Sestius in 56 BCE, in order for it to 'work' to support his argument (that it is implausible that a Roman consul such as himself would fear death), it needs to evoke immediately and straightforwardly the qualities of patriotism and willingness to lay one's life on the line for one's country with which Cicero is endeavouring to associate himself in that moment.⁴ This is especially the case if we think of the reference in a context of speech performance, where the audience has no opportunity to pause to recollect the story of Mucius, or revisit the reference later in the speech to reflect on its significance. Within a particular context of citation such as this, an exemplum needs to be very 'pointed' and be associated with specific moral qualities that its citation can then call instantly to mind. And yet the flexibility of exempla over time and between different moments of citation implies that the meaning of each story is *not* in fact fixed and pinned to particular moral qualities, but rather is subject to change over time and to being shaped differently for different arguments. This dynamism of exempla appears to threaten to undermine their normativity. At the very least this is a conundrum that needs to be explored, but I shall argue that it is in fact this very co-existence of pointedness and

² Chaplin 2000; see e.g. pp. 62–72 on how the exemplary significance of the Roman defeat at Cannae evolves over time.

³ E.g. Marincola 2010: 287: 'but the meaning of exempla was not fixed; they were both interactive and dynamic'; on the flexibility of exempla see also Gazich 1995 chapter 4, Lowrie 1997, Braun 2002, Roller 2004, Kraus 2005: 187–188; Stem 2007, Langlands 2008, Barchiesi 2009, Jaeger 2010: 84, Blom 2010: 16 and Goldschmidt 2013: 153.

⁴ Cic. Sest. 48: *ego vir consularis tantis rebus gestis timerem? praesertim cum eius essem civitatis ex qua C. Mucius solus in castra Porsennae venisset eumque interficere proposita sibi morte conatus esset*. See the beginning of Chapter 8 for further discussion of this passage in relation to cultural memory.

flexibility (consensus and indeterminacy) that creates the productive tension that powers exemplarity.

This chapter uses the case study of Mucius to demonstrate what this indeterminacy looks like in the sources, and also to highlight some of its ethical implications. Such indeterminacy of meaning is shown to be closely related to the asking of questions about the motivation of heroes and the moral value of their deeds; this in turn is related to certain cultural practices from ancient Rome, especially those of declamation and rhetorical education. From the surviving works of Latin literature, speculation about the motivation of exemplary heroes emerges as an essential element of Roman exemplary ethics, and one of the most important literary mechanisms for prompting moral re-evaluation of an exemplum. Other strategies for prompting alternative interpretations include focalising stories through different people, drawing out different aspects of the context in which stories unfold, characterising their protagonists, and considering the impact and consequences of their deeds.

My focus in this chapter will be on the treatment of exempla by Roman writers of the late Republic and early Empire. However, I will start with a brief look at the way that the Mucius story is later handled by defenders of Christianity, such as Tertullian (c.160–225), Lactantius (c.240–c.320) and Minucius Felix (late second to third century), because they provide such a clear introduction to the idea that attributing new motivation to a heroic protagonist changes one's evaluation of his exemplary deed. These writers have a particular investment in the reinterpretation and moral downgrading of Roman exempla, in contrast with their new and superior Christian exempla, yet at the same time they continue to find Roman exempla good material for ethical thinking.⁵ Their reinterpretation of Roman exempla relies especially on questioning the motive of a Roman hero, and often on attributing to him less than noble reasons for his exemplary deed. To Mucius Scaevola are attributed by such authors a range of different motivations that to a greater or lesser extent detract from the moral excellence of his heroism: to save his own life (Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 37), to gain fame and glory (Tertullian, *Mart.* 4), to obtain forgiveness for his crime against Porsenna (Lact. *Inst.* 5.13.13) or to achieve a kind of immortality through the lasting esteem of his countrymen, parallel to the immortality

⁵ Cf. Carlson 1948: 104: 'The vigor which the Latin apologists breathed into themes that had become stereotyped in the schools of rhetoric is easily apparent . . . Such familiar examples as Mucius Scaevola, Curtius, the Decii and Regulus are used in patristic literature to support doctrines often quite unknown to the ancient Romans. Pagan examples . . . are the commonplaces of a new dialectic.'

conferred by God (Lact. *Inst.* 3.12.22).⁶ In these Christian works the new interpretation through the imputation of different motivation is proudly spelled out, but it draws on a more subtle and muted tradition of playing around with motivation that belongs to the earlier Roman tradition too, and indeed is of fundamental importance within it.

Concern for motivation is already to be found in one of our earliest sources for the Mucius story, Cicero's citation of it in his *Paradoxa Stoicorum* of 46 BCE. This text sets out a series of six thought experiments which take some of the key paradoxical ideas of the Stoics (hard core philosophical challenges which are not very appealing to the general Roman public) and elaborate them as if they are rhetorical commonplaces (that is, generally agreed ideas) that can be incorporated into speeches.⁷ Just as we saw Seneca doing in the [previous chapter](#), Cicero here uses exempla as familiar reference points around which more challenging ideas are developed. In his elaboration of the Stoic paradox that 'The only good thing is moral worth', he asks his audience to consider the motives of great Roman heroes, such as Mucius, as a means to explore what in life has value:

What was it that compelled C. Mucius to try and kill Porsenna, without any hope of his own escape? What force held Coclès on the bridge alone against all the enemy's troops? What drove Decius, both the father and the son, sacrificing their lives, into the armed troops of the enemy? What was the reason for C. Fabricius' continence or for Manius Curius' frugal living? . . . Do the innumerable others (for we are overflowing with domestic exempla) appear to have thought that there was anything in life to be sought except for what was praiseworthy and *praeclarum*?

quae res ad necem Porsennae C. Mucium inpulit sine ulla spe salutis suae? quae vis Coclitem contra omnes hostium copias tenuit in ponte solum? quae patrem Decium, quae filium devota vita inmisit in armatas hostium copias? quid continentia C. Fabrici, quid tenuitas victus M'. Curi sequebatur? . . . innumerabiles alii (nam domesticis exemplis abundamus) cogitassene quicquam in vita sibi esse expetendum, nisi quod laudabile esset et praeclarum, videntur? (Cic. *Para.* 1.11–12).

⁶ Carlson 1948: 102: they 'often go out of their way to question his motive in thrusting his hand into the fire'. Cf. Alemany 2013: 76: on Christian adoption of exempla and criticism of Roman patriotism as an unworthy higher aim.

⁷ This is the explanation of Englert 1990 of what Cicero is endeavouring to achieve in *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, which suggests that this is why each Paradox plunges in right in the middle of an argument without giving us any sense of their wider argumentative context, and why they are all in the high style, impassioned and overexcited, as if an orator is reaching the climax of his speech. See also Wallach 1990, Ronnick 1992.

Here the questions are only rhetorical, and the reader is not actually being asked to question their understanding and discard their assumptions about the heroic motivation for the deeds of these heroes; they are rather invited to draw upon them. However, the point Cicero is making is that the right motivation is crucial for a moral exemplum, where the only virtuous motive is the pursuit of the good. The point that *causa* (motive) is fundamental to the moral evaluation of a deed is then picked up a little later in the third *Paradox*, where the argument is that killing one's parents is not always a morally bad act, and that it depends on one's reasons for killing them. The third paradox under treatment here is that all good deeds are the same as one another and all bad deeds are the same as one another, a key tenet of Stoicism and one that posed problems as a counterintuitive claim, and was frequently debated in Latin philosophy. Here an interlocutor is imagined protesting that this would mean there is no difference between killing one's parents (conventionally the worst imaginable crime) and killing a slave (far less reprehensible in Roman conventional understanding). The response is that one cannot simply evaluate a deed as 'good' or 'bad' on the basis of the facts of the deed itself, but only by also taking into account the *causa* that motivated it:

'It makes no difference, then,' (somebody will say) 'whether someone murders his father or a slave.' If you present these scenarios 'naked', it is not easy to evaluate them. If depriving a father of life is wickedness *per se*, then the people of Saguntum who preferred that their parents should die free rather than live as slaves were parricides. Therefore it is sometimes possible to deprive a parent of life without wickedness, and also it is often impossible to kill a slave without doing wrong. *Causa* (motive) therefore, and not the nature [*scil.* of the deed], makes the difference.

'nihilne igitur interest' (nam hoc dicet aliquis), 'patrem quis necet anne servum?' nuda ista si ponas, iudicari, qualia sint, non facile possint. patrem vita privare si per se scelus est, Saguntini, qui parentes suos liberos emori quam servos vivere maluerunt, parricidae fuerunt. ergo et parenti non numquam adimi vita sine scelere potest et servo saepe sine iniuria non potest. causa igitur haec, non natura distinguit (Cic. *Para.* 3.24).

Establishment of motive, then, is vital when one seeks to establish the moral significance of a deed, since the same action – here 'killing a father' – can have very different significance depending on the motive for which it is carried out. And throughout Latin literature, as a corollary of this, the process of *asking questions* about the motivations of exemplary heroes is

a major factor in opening up familiar stories to new interpretations and in keeping these traditional stories alive and relevant as they are handed down through the generations. Moreover, Romans – at least those with an elementary education in declamation – are brought up to think in this way, and are trained in the skills that enable them to speculate about the motivation for, and context of, acts in this productive way.

What do the ancient Roman texts say, then, about Mucius' motivation and how does this affect the interpretation of the story? The simple questions are: why did Mucius burn his own hand off? What were his intentions? And what difference does it make what his intentions were? As we shall see, the implications of these questions are considerable.

In his canonical version, Livy establishes the heroic nature of the deed both through attribution of motivation to Mucius and through the responses of those around him:

Nevertheless the siege continued and grain was running out and was very expensive, and Porsenna was beginning to hope that he was about to defeat the city just by staying there, when Gaius Mucius, a young nobleman, decided that it was unworthy that the Roman people who, when it was serving under the kings, had never been overcome by any battle or by any other enemies, should, now that it was free, be besieged by the Etruscans themselves, whose armies they had so often routed. So he resolved that this indignity should be expunged with a great and somewhat audacious deed. At first he planned to infiltrate the enemy camp on his own initiative; then he was afraid that if he set off without the orders of the consuls and without anyone's knowledge, he might be captured by the Roman guards and dragged back as a fugitive (a charge that the fortunes of the city would make believable), so he approached the senate: 'I would like to cross the Tiber, fathers,' he said, 'and to enter, if I am able, the enemy's camp. I am not intending to rob them, or to avenge myself against the populace; I have a greater deed in mind, if the gods are willing.' The senators approved; he set off with a sword hidden in his robes. When he arrived there, he stationed himself in the middle of a very dense crowd near the king's tribunal.

obsidio erat nihilo minus et frumenti cum summa caritate inopia, sedendoque expugnaturum se urbem spem Porsinna habebat, cum C. Mucius, adulescens nobilis, cui indignum videbatur populum Romanum servientem cum sub regibus esset nullo bello nec ab hostibus ullis obsessum esse, liberum eundem populum ab iisdem Etruscis obsideri quorum saepe exercitus fuderit—itaque magno audacique aliquo facinore eam indignitatem vindicandam ratus, primo sua sponte penetrare in hostium castra constituit; dein metuens ne si consulum iniussu et ignaris omnibus iret, forte

deprehensus a custodibus Romanis retraheretur ut transfuga, fortuna tum urbis crimen adfirmante, senatum adit. 'transire Tiberim' inquit, 'patres, et intrare, si possim, castra hostium volo, non praedo nec populationum in vicem ultor; maius si di iuvant in animo est facinus.' adprobant patres; abdito intra vestem ferro proficiscitur. ubi eo venit, in confertissima turba prope regium tribuna constitit (Liv. 2.12).

Livy's account gives us considerable insight into the thought process of Mucius 'it seemed to him' (*cui ... videbatur*), 'he thought' (*ratus*). We are told that Mucius did not think that it was seemly for the Romans to submit to military siege now that they were a free people when they had never done so as subjects of the kings, and we hear about the thought processes that he went through in deciding how best to respond to the situation, including why he decided to approach the senators for approval before setting off on his mission. We are told that what motivates him is a noble desire to rescue Rome from indignity; his plan is described as bold and ambitious, and it is sanctioned by the senate. Moreover, the consequences of the act – Porsenna's admiration of him and the resultant end of the siege of Rome – can act as a kind of retrospective justification of and explanation for Mucius' behaviour. That is to say, Mucius burned off his hand in order to save Rome, by proving to Porsenna that he was up against a tough and admirable enemy, whom he would not be able to break and with whom he therefore might as well negotiate.

In Livy's version of the story, Mucius is portrayed as cool and calm in the face of adversity, cleverly manipulating Porsenna with words and actions. The act of destroying his own hand in the fire can be read as a communicative act in its own right, with its own clear message. His behaviour can be interpreted as what modern psychologists term 'signalling with Deliberate Self-Harm' (DSH).⁸ That is to say, he deliberately burns off his hand in order to send the message to Porsenna that he is rock hard, and that is he not therefore to be deflected from his purpose or threatened with torture. The action itself constitutes the message. Nevertheless, the message is evidently felt not to be complete or unambiguous without further glossing, and needs to be supplemented by the rousing speech that Livy gives Mucius. Prior to the hand-burning scene, Mucius starts by announcing '*Romanus sum ... civis*' ('I am a Roman citizen') and he goes on to emphasise (fallaciously, as

⁸ Gambetta 2011: chapter 5, especially pages 137–139. Indeed, Gambetta uses the ancient example of Mucius to elucidate modern practice in prisons: 115–119, 130–139.

we have seen) the *Romanness* of his bravery in seeking to assassinate Porsenna.⁹ Subsequently, in response to Porsenna's threats of torture, he thrusts his hand into the flames and at that point uses further speech to make his action clear:

'en tibi' inquit, 'ut sentias quam vile corpus sit iis qui magnam gloriam vident'; dextramque accenso ad sacrificium foculo inicit. quam cum velut alienato ab sensu torreret animo, prope attonitus miraculo rex cum ab sede sua prosiluisset amoverique ab altaribus iuvenem iussisset.

'Watch this,' he said, 'and you will understand how cheap the body is for those who have their eyes on great glory.' And he thrust his right hand into burning coals as a sacrifice. As he burned his hand as if his mind was cut off from physical sensation, the king, as if amazed by a miracle, leapt up from his throne and ordered the young man to take his hand away from the altar (Livy 2.12).

The purpose of Mucius' two speeches is to augment the message of the physical act by leading Porsenna to extrapolate from it a broader message about Romans in general. It is not just *this* Roman who is hard as nails; he is merely a representative of the whole Roman community. These speeches, the masterful manipulation of Porsenna over the course of the whole episode, and the calm demeanour that Mucius displays, all provide vital context that gives meaning to the act of destroying his hand. They help to establish both for Porsenna (within the narrative) and for the reader (externally) that there is a cool and rational explanation for this shocking display.¹⁰

Without the speech and the calm demeanour, the sight of Mucius destroying his own hand by thrusting it into the sacrificial flames might look like an act of savage and crazed desperation, the act of a man driven mad by his failure to fulfil his assassination mission and by his realisation that his city is now doomed. None of the various motives suggested in extant ancient Latin literature direct readers to quite such a radical re-evaluation of the moral significance of Mucius' action – none suggest that it was motivated by outright madness or panic – and the story tradition carries enough historical context with it

⁹ '*Romanus sum*' inquit, '*civis; C. Mucium vocant. hostis hostem occidere volui, nec ad mortem minus animi est, quam fuit ad caedem; et facere et pati fortia Romanum est*' ('I am a Roman citizen,' he said. 'They call me Gaius Mucius. I am your enemy and my intention is to kill you, and I am no less determined to die than I am to kill. It is the Roman way to both perform and suffer acts of bravery,' Liv. 2.12).

¹⁰ Cf. Wilcox 2005: 275–276: Mucius is 'reinterpreting his awkward situation for its observers' so that 'an unlooked for outcome' becomes 'further evidence of his virtue'.

to establish the patriotic tenor of the act within the working consensus.¹¹ Nevertheless there is some room for manoeuvre even within these heroic parameters, and some texts allow some passion and negative emotion as part of Mucius' motivation, in a way that somewhat complicate his heroism.

However, when other sources press the issue of motivation and attempt to offer explanations for Mucius' behaviour, the story begins to open up in interesting ways. Valerius Maximus, for instance, makes the suggestion that Mucius burned his hand because he was angry at it for its failure to kill Porsenna. That this is a particular and personal interpretation of the story is signalled by his use of the first person *credo* ('I believe') in his account: *perosus enim, credo, dexteram suam, quod eius ministerio in caede regis uti nequisset, iniectam foculo exuri passus est* ('It was anger at his right hand that had failed to kill the king, I believe, that led him to burn it away in the fire', Val. Max. 3.3.1). Valerius' *credo* makes it clear that, even in the case of a hallowed tale such as this, it is considered legitimate for an author to attribute his own explanation to a hero's behaviour. The idea that Mucius might have destroyed his hand through anger at its failure may diminish the perceived moral value of the deed (even if the physical endurance of the man is still impressive): rather than a calculated strategy to save Rome it becomes an act of rage and despair. Other ancient accounts also describe Mucius burning his own hand in terms of punishment; for instance, Silius Italicus describes Mucius with 'his anger turned upon himself' (Sil. *Pun.* 8. 386–387).

However, when the motivation for this punishment is not anger, as in the previous examples, but rather a dispassionate decision to inflict punishment for moral failing, some moral high-ground can be retained, as it is in the references found in Seneca's philosophical works: 'Mucius . . . himself exacted punishment from himself for his own mistake' (*Mucius . . . ipse a se exigit erroris sui poenas*, Seneca *Prov.* 3.5).¹² In this formulation, Mucius becomes an exemplum of strict discipline, enforcing high moral standards even for himself. The act of burning his hand is once again a decision rather than a passionate reflex. Such an explanation ties Mucius' tale into the persistent discourse about the glories of Roman military discipline and the

¹¹ Although cf. Heikkinen 1997: 65, 'It would be possible, for example, to interpret Mucius' self-mutilation as irrational and inconsiderate behaviour.'

¹² See also *Ep.* 24.5 (*poena a se inriti conatur exigentem*) and *Ben.* 7.25. The attribution of moral qualities to a body part that is separate from the part of the self that is making the decision raises further questions; see Heikkinen 1997 for a discussion of this motif in Seneca's treatment of the Mucius story.

sacrifices needed to maintain it that we have seen many times are running themes in exemplary ethics.

The works of Livy, Valerius Maximus and Silius Italicus each present small but significant variations in Mucius' motivation for burning his hand, from the coolly calculated to the furious. These variations in turn calibrate slightly differently the moral evaluation of Mucius' deed, and of what strength and qualities the man possesses – even though the core elements of the deed itself remain the same throughout. We see here an indeterminacy about motivation and specific moral significance within an overall shared consensus that the deed is heroic and morally valuable.

Ancient accounts of Mucius' story also make explicit reference themselves to the importance of knowing someone's motivation when evaluating their deed. For instance, Livy's account implies that Mucius' attempt to assassinate Porsenna might have been misunderstood by bystanders as motivated by less than heroic desires, and he makes it clear that Mucius himself is anxious that his actions in leaving the camp to try and reach Porsenna should not be misinterpreted. It is to this end that he reveals his plan to the senate before he sets off on his mission: 'Fearing lest, if he set off without telling anyone and without official sanction, he would be brought before the senate as a deserter if he was apprehended by the Roman guards, he went to the senate at this point' (*metuens ne si consulum iniussu et ignaris omnibus iret, forte deprehensus a custodibus Romanis retraheretur ut transfuga, fortuna tum urbis crimen adfirmante, senatum adit*, Liv. 2.12). As we have seen, authors who have reason to undermine the heroism of this Roman tale (primarily early Christian authors) attribute far less admirable motives to Mucius precisely as a means to this end. In comparison to the Christian martyrs with whom he is compared in their accounts, Mucius' motivation is base (and indeed anything other than the service of God could be nothing but base in this context). On one of the occasions on which Tertullian refers to the story of Mucius, he is explicitly representing his deed as less admirable and glorious than the endurance of the Christian martyrs, and this contrast is partly achieved through the claim that Mucius was motivated by a desire to be famous: 'Mucius burned away his right hand on the altar hearth, in order that this deed would make him famous' (*Mucius manum suam dexteram in ara cremavit, ut hoc factum eius fama haberet*, Tert. *ad Mart.*, 4.4).

The two related factors of context and motivation are crucial when it comes to assessing the moral value of an act. Two ancient literary texts, an epigram by Martial and Valerius Maximus' chapter on *patientia*, highlight

this importance in relation to the story of Mucius. They also emphasise, once again, the absolutely central issue that an act is not *in itself* inherently morally good or right, but is only morally good in relation to a particular context. That context includes the reason for which it is performed.

The first text to consider here is the final epigram in a series of three that Martial wrote in response to a staged re-enactment of Mucius' burning of his hand as spectacle in the arena, *Epigrams* 10.25.¹³ This poem makes the point about how far moral evaluation rests upon motivation rather brutally, by penetrating the heroic façade of the spectacle and revealing the moral degradation at its heart. In the previous epigrams in the series, 1.21 and 8.30, Martial has suspended disbelief and maintained the theatrical fiction of the spectacle. That is to say, he treats the scene going on in the arena as if it really were Mucius who was holding his hand in the fire, and discusses it *as* Mucius' deed. In *Epigram* 10.25, however, he switches instead to thinking about the position of the man who is actually in the arena, the man who 'played' Mucius in this re-enactment of the famous deed. His poem considers what kind of deed this re-enactment was, in strong contrast to the original deed of heroism that it imitates.

This man (or so we are told) burned his hand without flinching during the Flavian spectacles, just as Mucius had done all those centuries ago before the audience of Porsenna.¹⁴ His was a literal, 'structural' (or 'slavish' – Blundell's term emerging as especially pertinent here) re-enactment of Mucius' extraordinary, shocking deed – one that replicates the physical elements of the deed itself. And, in enduring the same agonies and the same damage to his limb, the man in the arena can be seen to have manifested exactly the same qualities of *patientia* and *constantia* as Mucius did in his original display of virtue. Although it is staged, it is no less real, and it can, in these terms, be considered as impressive a feat of physical endurance as that of Mucius. Martial's poem starts by stoking this interpretation of the show as heroic re-enactment in the first three lines. Then in line 4 it switches to insulting the reader for having gone along with this

¹³ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of Mart. *Ep.* 1.21 on the same spectacle.

¹⁴ The distinction between this re-enactment of a Roman exemplum and the re-enactments of Greek myth that Martial describes might be significant. As Fitzgerald's study has brought out, one function of these mythical re-enactments was a display of imperial power that showed its capacity for making real and present the mythical and incredible. This is not so with the case of Mucius, which is a historical story (Fitzgerald 2007: 48–57 on mythical re-enactment and 57–67 on Mucius); cf. Leigh 1997, especially 246 and 279–282, using the example of Mucius to develop the idea that the spectacular aspect of Roman exempla, especially in the Stoic context, prompts a comparison of heroic feats with the feats of gladiators, which in turn complicates their heroic status through a comparison with these low status individuals.

interpretation, and in lines 5–6 it concludes by explaining why the slave’s deed fails to be admirable:

Recently on display in the morning arena,
Mucius, who placed his own hand on the hearth
If he seemed to you steadfast and hard and brave,
You have the soul of an Abderitian peasant.
For when, with the instruments of torture close by, the command is
“Burn your hand!” it is more impressive to say: “I won’t do it.”

in matutina nuper spectatus harena
Mucius, inposuit qui sua membra focus,
si patiens durusque tibi fortisque videtur,
Abderitanae pectora plebis habes.
nam cum dicatur tunica praesente molesta
‘ure manum,’ plus est dicere ‘non facio’ (Mart. *Ep.* 10.25).

If you were rating the man in the arena as if he were a Mucius – a hardman displaying the admirable qualities of *patientia* and *fortitudo* – then the central couplet reveals that you have misunderstood the scenario that you are watching (or ‘watching’ through Martial’s description of it). The build up of lines 1–3 (together with Martial’s two previous poems on the subject) suggests that admiration of this man as a hero might be a natural, though unthinking, response to the show. However, what Martial then suggests is that the very same action in this particular context is actually to be interpreted as having almost the opposite value – a demonstration of the man’s abject slavery, even cowardice.¹⁵

In Livy’s influential version of the original story, as we have seen, Mucius’ burning of his own hand sent a strong message about his own refusal to succumb to torture and betray his country, as well as about his virtues as a Roman, and therefore about the virtues of Romans as a nation. Mucius’ deed was a demonstration that he was master of his own body and his own fate – Porsenna could threaten or subject him to nothing that he was not prepared to inflict upon himself. He was very much the agent of the deed, creating, through this spirited improvisation, opportunity for Rome’s salvation where none seemed to present itself. The slave in the arena, by contrast, is acting on the orders of somebody else. As Andrew Feldherr summarises: ‘Martial’s exposure of the constraints placed on the

¹⁵ Cf. Feldherr 2010: 176: ‘[T]he performance seems to have gone exactly according to plan. The “Mucius”, almost unbelievably, succeeded in seeming *patiens*, *durus*, and *fortis* throughout the ordeal. But Martial himself steps in to detonate the audience’s admiration for this feat by differentiating it from legend.’

performer in this case deftly transform physical torture from the demonstration of Roman *libertas*, which it was for Scaevola, to the paradigmatic mark of servitude in the case of the real performer.¹⁶ This man is burning his hand for the entertainment of others. What kind of reason or *causa* is this?¹⁷ How could he bring himself to stand there and endure the pain without crying out *in those circumstances*? The only reason can be that he is unable to refuse his orders.¹⁸ Feldherr again: ‘An awareness of the realities of the arena, specifically that this is a slave who, far from resisting torture, only succeeds in his impersonation under the threat of torture, turns on its head the very point of the story.’¹⁹

That what may look at first sight like an enactment of heroism is actually an enactment of slavery is a cruel twist for the mutilated man in the arena. However, it also highlights the familiar problem that deeds that look identical – indeed, in this case, actually *are* identical in important respects – can in reality have very different moral value.²⁰ In order to appreciate an exemplary deed properly, or indeed any act that we observe, (the epigram suggests) we cannot merely look, because looks can deceive; we must think and appraise and dig beneath the surface. The difference between the deed when performed by Mucius himself and when performed by an actor in the arena ‘playing’ Mucius is potentially troubling and thought-provoking. This is especially true in the context of the exempla tradition from which the story of Mucius comes. It is not enough to imitate – however faithfully – the actions of the great heroes. The right motivational framework must be in place.²¹

In the case of the coerced actor in the arena, there is certainly no greater good for which the hand is sacrificed and the pain endured. Its purpose might even be seen as base: the entertainment of the masses. The spectacle can be read as the transformation of the inspirational tale of patriotic heroism into something that is morally meaningless.²² Above all, the

¹⁶ Feldherr 2010: 176. ¹⁷ Cf. Cic. *Parad.* 1.11–12.

¹⁸ This comparison of the real Mucius with his imitator also serves to make the point that knowing the story makes all the difference to the way the spectators would have evaluated what they saw in the arena. It is only in the context of the exempla tradition (what I shall call in the following chapter the ‘site of exemplarity’) that the false Mucius can be understood to be performing a heroic deed; without the field of reference provided by the site of exemplarity, which dresses the act in heroic garb, it would be a grotesque and pointless waste of human life, without further moral significance.

¹⁹ Feldherr 2010: 176. ²⁰ As discussed in Chapter 5.

²¹ See Chapter 5, especially the discussion of the story of Manlius Torquatus.

²² See Fitzgerald 2007: 57–67 for a discussion of Martial’s three epigrams on Mucius that brings out the idea of reducing heroism to mere entertainment.

message is that the moral significance is not inherent in the materiality of the deed alone.

A similar idea is also conveyed by Valerius Maximus in his treatment of the Mucius story in his chapter on the moral quality of *patientia* (endurance). Within this chapter (3.3), Valerius draws attention in a number of ways to the idea that the evaluation of a moral deed depends significantly upon its context and motivation, as well as upon the perspective of the spectator or the person evaluating the deed. The acts of reimagining context or motivation or of shifting perspective are, therefore, what we might call ‘re-interpretative strategies’, and they are widespread as such in Latin literature. Indeed, they are fundamental to operationalising the ‘flexibility’ of exempla in literary texts. The means by which they operate will be explored in greater detail in subsequent chapters, along with their implications for ethical learning and thinking.²³ For now however a brief analysis of Valerius Maximus’ chapter will serve to introduce these strategies and show how they are activated within the text, as well as to further illuminate the flexibility or indeterminacy of the Mucius exemplum.

The first part of the chapter can be read as a riff on the Mucius story, where motifs from that famous story are repeated in new contexts (that is to say, integrated into other stories) in such a way as to prompt re-evaluation of their significance. The first exemplum that is cited under this rubric is the story of Mucius itself. It is not simply the fact that they are all presented side-by-side as illustrations of *patientia* that prompts a direct comparison of Mucius’ tale with the two stories that follow. It is also the fact that there is obvious repetition in these stories of motifs from the Mucius story, and in particular the very memorable motif of the burning flesh that is common to all three of the first exempla cited. The story of Pompeius burning off his finger in a lamp rather than betray the secrets of the senate to his captor King Gentius (3.3.2) is closely modeled on the Mucius story, imitating it entirely in structure:

Admirable too was the virtue of Pompeius, who, while he was acting as ambassador, was captured by king Gentius. When he was ordered to betray the plans of the senate, he held his outstretched finger to be burned by the blazing lantern, and with such powers of endurance he inspired the king with despair that he would find out anything from him through torture and at the same time inspired him with a great desire to seek the friendship of the Roman people.

²³ See especially my discussions in [Chapters 12](#) and [13](#).

Pompei etiam probabilis virtus, qui, dum legationis officio fungitur, a rege Gentio interceptus, cum senatus consilia prodere iuberetur, ardenti lucernae admotum digitum cremandum praebuit eaque patientia regi simul et desperationem tormentis quicquam ex se cognoscendi incussit et expetendae populi Romani amicitiae magnam cupiditatem ingeneravit (Val. Max. 3.3.2).

In addition to these structural similarities of plot, phrases in this second story and the third story that follows directly recall the story of Mucius' that preceded them, and sound as if they come from a telling of Mucius' own story. In the Pompeius story, the entire concluding section from *eaque patientia* ('with such powers of endurance') sounds as if it were a comment upon Mucius' story. If one encountered such phrases out of context, one would assume they were part of an account of Mucius' deed. This 'displacement' of ideas from the chapter's leading or best-known exemplum to other less familiar material in the chapter is a common feature of Valerius' work; here it adds to the sense that the three opening stories – Mucius, Pompeius and Alexander's boy – are variations on the same topos, even as we move away from Rome and into a Macedonian example:²⁴

There was an ancient Macedonian custom whereby young boys from noble families used to assist the king Alexander in performing sacrifices. One day one of these boys was standing in front of the king and holding the incense burner, when a piece of white-hot charcoal fell on his arm. As it continued to smoulder, all around him could smell the burning flesh, yet he suppressed his agony in silence and held his arm completely still so that he should not hold up Alexander's sacrifice by knocking the incense burner, or defile it by letting out a groan. The king was charmed by the boy's resistance to pain, and all the keener that he should be put to another test of his perseverance. He deliberately took a long time over the sacrifice and was not deflected from his programme.

vetusto Macedoniae more regi Alexandro nobilissimi pueri praesto erant sacrificanti. e quibus unus turibulo arrepto ante ipsum adstitit. in cuius brachium carbo ardens delapsus est. quo etsi ita urebatur, ut adusti corporis eius odor ad circumstantium nares perveniret, tamen et dolorem silentio pressit et brachium immobile tenuit, ne sacrificium Alexandri aut concusso turibulo impediret aut edito gemitu aspergeret. rex, quo patientia pueri magis delectatus est, hoc certius perseverantiae experimentum sumere

²⁴ See Langlands 2008 for an analysis of its slightly different operation in relation to the Torquatus story in chapter 2.7.

voluit: consulto enim sacrificavit diutius nec hac re eum proposito repulit (Val. Max. 3.3.ext.1).

This powerful description from the third exemplum in the sequence, about the young boy assisting Alexander the Great with a sacrifice, again strongly resonates with the Mucius exemplum that we have just read: 'As it continued to smoulder, all around him could smell the burning flesh, yet he suppressed his agony in silence and held his arm completely still' (Val. Max. 3.3.ext.1). This describes the boy continuing to assist Alexander in the sacrifice even as his arm smouldered, but it could equally well serve to describe Mucius' defiant stance before Porsenna. Indeed, as a line which vividly evokes the experience of bystanders, and in particular the *smell* of the burning flesh which those nearby had to endure, this line is more viscerally engaging than any of the lines in the passage with which Valerius actually does describe Mucius' deed. There is no doubt that when we encounter this line in 3.3.ext.1 we are intended to think again of Mucius, whose story we have just read in 3.3.1. However, this intratextual allusion, prompting comparison between the two tales, serves to emphasise how much less impressive is the achievement of the Macedonian boy when viewed in the light of Mucius' achievement. And it is less impressive not just on the level of pain and sacrifice endured, but also in terms of moral value established by the different context and motivation for the deeds. The Romans Mucius and Pompeius make a deliberate choice to badly burn parts of their body, and thereby communicate to their onlookers their resistance to torture;²⁵ the Macedonian boy endures an ember that fell on him accidentally. Mucius and Pompeius choose to destroy important body parts (the right hand, a finger) while the boy suffers burns to part of his arm, which are presumably more superficial. Most significantly, however, the Romans perform their deeds in military and patriotic contexts, on behalf of Rome, in front of the enemy and with the result that the enemy capitulates to Rome. Alexander's boy suffers in the safety of a domestic religious setting and in the presence of his own king, whose response is to be charmed (*delectatus*) by his courage.

The story is charming, but hardly glorious in the same way, and this very contrast between the stories underlines Roman military supremacy. The two Roman exempla that initiate the sequence are both performed in the context of Roman military crisis, and lead to negotiations with the enemy leader at a time when Rome is under threat.

²⁵ In neither case is this explicitly described as the motivation, and it must be supplied by the readers, drawing on their knowledge of the tradition.

The boy's story is set in the court of Alexander the Great, and lacks the heroic context of the immediate military setting. The fact that the significance of similar feats of physical endurance will vary depending on whether they take place in a military setting is emphasised by Valerius' concluding comment upon this third story, which throws a new light on the exemplum:

If only Darius had seen this marvel he would have known that soldiers of such stock could not be conquered, when even one of their young lads was endowed with such strength.

si huic miraculo Dareus inseruisset oculos, scisset eius stirpis milites vinci non posse cuius infirmam aetatem tanto robore praeditam animadvertisset (Val. Max. 3.3.ext.1).

This final comment introduces the Persian king Darius as a new (hypothetical) spectator to the boy's deed, and a new hypothetical setting of military conflict between Macedonia and Persia, and thereby changes the deed's significance. The presence of Darius as spectator, as Valerius here suggests, would have brought a new weight to this exemplum, teaching an enemy a different lesson, a lesson about the communal character of Macedonia rather than about *patientia* – that it could not be conquered (*vinci non posse*). This boy's courage in the face of pain would indeed have functioned as an exemplum of Macedonian backbone to impress and influence his country's enemies, just as the Roman ones have done in the previous exempla. With this final sentence, Valerius introduces (if only hypothetically) the military and patriotic context that has been thus far lacking in this tale, giving the boy his Persian 'Porsenna', as an admiring spectator of the deed, and drawing further comparison between warlike Macedonia and Rome. Here Valerius' alerts us to the fact that the same deed will look different to different spectators and readers, and that the message conveyed by an exemplum depends on the relation of the reader or audience to the exemplum.²⁶

The patriotic *patientia* and the importance of the community context in these earlier examples are thrown into relief by later examples in the chapter. At 3.3.ext.6, for instance, there is a brief description of the astonishing powers of endurance demonstrated by Indian fakirs, who are

²⁶ Roman literary texts often use different focalisations of the same event to bring out its various ethical ramifications; the operation of this technique will be explored in more detail in [Chapters 12 and 13](#) (especially on representations of Regulus, Torquatus, Fabius Maximus and Horatius). On spectators and focalisation in relation to exempla, see Leigh 1997: 170–171 (discussing Val. Max 3.2) and 165 on the effect of the 'double audience'.

able to tolerate the extreme cold of the Causasian mountain without clothes, and to walk upon burning coals. The behaviour of these Indian sages manifests the quality of *patientia*, to be sure, but in this case it is *patientia* that has no external moral context or cause. These Indians practise and hone such skills for their own sake. Valerius expresses admiration for them, but there is ambivalence in his praise; admiration is tinged with scepticism about the value of this practice in the greater scheme of things:

Indeed it is believed that among the Indians, the practice of *patientia* is pursued so obstinately that there are those who spend the whole of their lives naked, now hardening their bodies in the icy cold of the Caucasus mountain, now holding them in flames without a single groan. And they are endowed with no small glory for this contempt for pain, and they are given the title of wisdom.

apud Indos vero patientiae meditatio tam obstinate usurpari creditur, ut sint qui omne vitae tempus nudi exigant, modo Caucasi montis gelido rigore corpora sua durantes, modo flammis sine ullo gemitu obicientes. atque his haud parva gloria contemptu doloris acquiritur titulusque sapientiae datur (Val. Max. 3.3.ext.6).

The point is made with subtlety, but it is notable that in this passage the verbs are all in the passive, effectively distancing Valerius' own authorial voice (which had sounded so clearly with *credo* – 'I believe' – at the start of the chapter) from the judgments that are here described at the end of the chapter (*creditur*, *adquiritur*, *datur* – 'it is believed', 'is acquired', 'is given'). It is not the author who is awarding these Indians glory and calling them 'wise'; this is a judgment made by others.²⁷ This distance makes the point that it is hard to evaluate the moral worth of deeds that are performed for their own sake and not for the sake of some greater external cause, such as one's country's security and saving the lives of others. How much praise do such self-serving acts of endurance deserve?²⁸ The use of the word *creditur* in the passive gently brings us back to Valerius' striking first person intervention of *credo* in Mucius' story at the start of the chapter, the repetition of

²⁷ This echoes the note of scepticism sounded at Cic. *Tusc.* 5.77, where fakirs are described as *qui sapientes habentur* 'those who are held to be wise'.

²⁸ The traditional Roman exempla that are transmitted as the heroic deeds from the legendary days of the early Republic tend to have precisely this motivational context; literature dating from the decades after Valerius is writing tends to explore a more individualised and internalised kind of virtue. See Roller 2001 on this phenomenon in Seneca's philosophical writing, and Chapter 11 for further discussion of trends and changes in thinking about virtue and exemplarity in the period of the early empire.

forms of *credere* pointing up the contrast in the different levels of commitment to these exempla that Valerius is expressing. Like Martial, Valerius also suggests that extraordinary feats might be revealed to be morally empty if the right context and motivation are revealed to be lacking.

Over the course of this chapter on *patientia*, Valerius' treatment of the Mucius story – through comment and through juxtaposition with other exemplary material – draws attention to the extent to which one's moral evaluation of an exemplum is dependent on what one attributes to it in the way of context, motivation and greater cause. It also shows that much depends on the perspective of the evaluator as spectator or reader and his or her relation to the exemplary deed. The journey from 'our' Roman history at the start of the chapter to the foreignness of the far reaches of India mapped out in the chapter's progression from Rome, through Alexandria and Greece and then to India, is reflected in the movement of perspective from the first person *credo* to the passive third person *creditur*. The distance between these two positions is also echoed by the different perspectives and responses of Alexander and Darius within 3.3.ext.1.

In its variation, Valerius' chapter also attributes, like Martial's epigram, different motivations to similar acts of endurance. His juxtaposition of examples that are variations on the theme of the endurance of the pain of burning flesh invites comparison in such a way as to bring out the differences between those stories in terms of their context, motivation and consequent moral value. His treatment illustrates the close connection between context and motivation. It is the context of war, capture and subsequent negotiation with the enemy that enables the attribution of patriotism as a motive in the cases of Mucius and Pompeius. In contrast, the story of Alexander's boy is set in a more intimate setting of Alexander's immediate circle. In that setting, the boy's motivation is desire to please his leader and to show obedience, respect and the potential to shine in a military setting. Although the physical and mental prowess that is shown by Mucius and the boy is the same in both cases – the determination and ability to withstand pain – the motivation for demonstrating this prowess is rather different in each case. In Valerius' hands, the point is made gently; in Martial's epigram the same point is made in a more forceful way, with the contrasting settings of the enemy camp and the arena resulting in a strong differentiation between the aims of patriotism and entertainment, and to very different characterisations of the individuals involved, despite, once again, their display of similar *patientia*.

Within the broader working consensus, then, the story of Mucius has no single and fixed moral significance, but rather certain aspects are open to interpretation and reinterpretation. Different authors and audiences interpret his deed in different ways and imagine for it new contexts and new explanations that cast it in a new light. As I have argued, the meaning is opened up primarily by asking questions about why the hero did what he did and what greater or further goal he may have been reaching for. This is especially clear when we read the treatment of Mucius' story (and of exempla more generally) by Roman philosophers, who deploy such techniques openly and explicitly in their consideration of moral value, as we have seen.²⁹ However, as my discussion of Martial and Valerius Maximus has shown, it is also embedded less overtly in other literary genres as a means of opening up familiar material to new interpretation. This then is what the flexibility of exempla looks like in Latin literature. New interpretations and new evaluations are generated through literary and rhetorical strategies that can be divided into two broad categories: first, questioning *causa* and context, second, shifting one's perspective to see things from a new point of view (focalisation). Such strategies help to bridge the gap between the *consensus* about Mucius as hero and the *indeterminacy* of meaning that is also part of the tradition. They are also, as I shall go on to argue in the following section, strategies that would have been *taught* as part of the standard Roman rhetorical education.

*

In an illuminating article on the oral and performative dimension of Roman declamation, Margaret Imber has described the practice of declamation as one in which practitioners take familiar, stock themes as the basis for persuasive elaboration where one of their main tasks is to conjure up vividly for their audiences the motivations of the characters involved, in order to bring their audiences to a particular judgment about the events that are described.³⁰ There are notable parallels between the practice of declamation as Imber describes it, in which so many young Roman men were involved in the early empire, and features of Roman exemplary ethics that can be observed in the sources. Exploring these parallels can enhance our appreciation of the way exempla worked in Roman culture, and also make the case that for a substantial section of Roman society the skills

²⁹ In addition to the earlier discussion of Cicero's *Paradoxa Stoicorum* and of Seneca in [Chapter 5](#), see also the discussion of Cicero's *De finibus* in [Chapter 12](#).

³⁰ Imber 2001.

needed to exploit the indeterminacy of *exempla* would have been second nature by the time they reached adulthood.

Declamatory exercises were part of standard education for young Roman men of a certain class in the early empire,³¹ through which they practised and honed the skills of argumentation that would later be developed through the more advanced rhetorical training that prepared them for public speaking. As far as we can tell from the surviving texts, there were two kinds of exercises through which the students honed their skills and the experts displayed their prowess: *suasoriae* and *controversiae*. *Suasoriae* were deliberative exercises focusing on a historical character faced with making a critical decision; the declaimer would either provide advice to such figures as Cicero and Alexander the Great or speak in their voice.³² The *controversia* consisted of the bare bones of a tricky scenario, cast in the form of a complex legal case, for which the declaimer must argue on one side or another. A typical *controversia* topic is this: 'A husband and wife swore that if something happened to one of them the other one would die. While he was away, the husband sent a messenger to tell his wife that he was dead. She threw herself from a height. Restored to health she is ordered by her father to leave her husband; she doesn't want to. Her father disowns her.'³³ As we can see, this rubric comprises a rather complex plot that piles together a series of ethically challenging scenarios. Three people are involved, but their characters and motivations are not apparent beyond what may be implicit in their actions.

The topics of declamatory exercises were standard and familiar, with recurrent stock characters and plot motifs. Their rubrics were handed down in a specific and concise form, as the examples previously cited illustrate.³⁴ Such rubrics provide stereotypical characters and the bare bones of a scenario; but what is missing from them, significantly, is characterisation of the people involved and explanation of their motives: 'The *controversiae* provide no motives, no distinguishing identities, no

³¹ On the role of declamation in rhetorical education, see Morgan 1998, Gunderson 2003, Bloomer 2011.

³² Seneca's *Suasoria* topics include: Should Alexander sail across the ocean? Should the Three Hundred retreat from Thermopylae? Should Agamemnon sacrifice Iphigenia? Should Alexander enter Babylon? Should Cicero beg Antony for his life? Should Cicero burn his own works so that Antony will spare him?

³³ Sen. *Contr.* 2.2: *vir et uxor iuraverunt, ut, si quid alteri optigisset, alter moreretur. vir peregre profectus misit nuntium ad uxorem, qui diceret decessisse virum. uxor se praecipitavit. recreata iubetur a patre relinquere virum; non vult. abdicatur.*

³⁴ Imber 2001: 202 points out that although the declamations themselves might be ruthlessly excerpted, the *controversiae* – the 'problems' that generate the declamations – are scrupulously preserved.

character development.³⁵ At the same time, when it came to composition, a declaimer could be sure that everyone in the audience would be familiar with the plot and the scenario. No effort was needed to communicate these, and the energies could be expended in making the most of this common ground, and in working creatively with the material with which everyone is familiar. As Imber says: 'A declaimer could hypothesize any motive or quote conversations, dreams or soliloquies for his characters, and as long as he did not contradict the few facts that the *controversiae* offered the limits of his imagination were his only constraint.'³⁶

This offers a helpful model for understanding how *exempla* functioned, and in particular how the elements of working consensus and indeterminacy might have co-existed in Roman thought. A declamatory theme combines a core rubric upon which all participants agree with a process of improvisation around this rubric by which that core is given significance and colour. The improvisations of the declaimers are tethered by the given details of the rubric – the bare bones of a plot and a legal and ethical 'problem' to tackle – and guided by the rhetorical techniques they have learned and are in the process of learning, but they are also open to infinite variation within those constraints, and the skill of the declaimer lies in saying something new and persuasive about the case on each new occasion.³⁷ Similarly, as we have seen, *exempla* have a working consensus about plot and moral value with which everybody is familiar, but the expectation is that this core forms the basis for elaborations which lead to various interpretations and revised significance for the tale. The skills of improvisation around a familiar plot, of giving persuasive accounts of motivation in a context of evaluative judgment – these are precisely what we see played out in the treatment of Roman exemplary tales throughout Latin literature.

In the cases both of declamation and of *exempla* the elaboration of familiar plots involves, in particular, supplying the motivations, emotions and intentions of their protagonists, and in both cases this is done as a way of directing others to a particular moral evaluation of the events in question. These shared motifs – the close relationship between motivation and characterisation on the one hand, and moral judgment on the other, and the way that familiar plots can be handled to bring out the implications of this relationship – are also, I argue, an

³⁵ Imber 2001: 203. ³⁶ Imber 2001: 204.

³⁷ On improvisation in declamation, see further Bernstein 2013: 4–6, Gunderson 2003: 15.

important feature of Roman exemplary ethics more broadly, the cultural framework within which these two cultural practices evolve and operate.³⁸ Practicing declamation and working with the raw material of declamatory rubrics brought students to a familiarity with shared Roman values³⁹ and also helped them to develop their skills in thinking with and around these values.⁴⁰ Handling, reading, discussing and using exempla – as all Romans would have done throughout their lives – would also have been on-going exercise in learning about Roman values.

This possibility of continual re-elaboration and reinterpretation of familiar material is what lends life to exempla. Each new elaboration can contribute towards the existing consensus, and thereby to its development over time. This idea of the ‘life of stories’ that change with every telling is something we are familiar with in relation to fairy-tales and folk-tales.⁴¹ The twist here is that exempla purport to be accounts of real historical events, and thus they are subject to further constraints about the shape they can take, beyond those imposed by their belonging to an established tradition.⁴² A fictional declamatory rubric presents a scenario that is completely open-ended and open to interpretation without consequences. When one argues for the guilt or innocence of a protagonist, there is no getting it right or wrong; there is only more or less persuasive. When historicity is a feature of the scenario, there is both less freedom to manoeuvre and more at stake.⁴³

To return to the conundrum with which I began this chapter, the parallels with declamation offer a model for understanding how the indeterminacy of exempla can be reconciled with their function as ‘closed’ and ‘pointed’ in particular contexts. The story-tradition transmitted around any given exemplum (which I shall theorise in the [following chapter](#) as a ‘site of exemplarity’) does not offer neat closure and a simple moral message. If this were so, exempla would not have sustained such

³⁸ See further [Chapter 12](#) on this duality of exempla as consisting of on one level aspects that are ‘given’ and on another openness of interpretation, specifically focusing on motivation.

³⁹ ‘The very process of composing a declamation forced the student declaimer to learn Roman values and the contradictions between them’ (Imber 2001: 209).

⁴⁰ See Langlands 2006 [chapter 5](#) on how this might have worked in relation to the value of *pudicitia* in a couple of ancient declamation topics.

⁴¹ Discussed further in [Chapter 8](#).

⁴² Demoen 1997 makes a clear distinction between fictional and historical paradigms used in Greek rhetoric, but I think the situation is slightly different in Rome.

⁴³ This is also the case with many *suasoriae* topics, which draw on historical material, as well as e.g. the Marian soldier *controversiae* theme.

interest for so many centuries. Yet many individual texts *do* in fact seem to offer ‘closure’ in the sense of expressing great certainty and clarity about the meaning of the story. The ‘pointedness’ of exempla, the idea that they convey simple moral messages and exemplify virtues, is indeed an important feature of Roman tradition, and we cannot ignore it. At the moment of citation in an argument, the indeterminacy of meaning may need to be shut down. If Cicero’s audience of the *Pro Sestio* are mainly wondering if Mucius really did set out on his mission to kill Porsenna because he wanted to become famous, and whether the safety of his city really was at the forefront of his mind, then this would detract from Cicero’s point about his own patriotism and willingness to face death for the sake of his country. Or, if Seneca’s philosophical student is wondering whether Mucius may have succumbed to violent anger at his own hand, this substantially undercuts Seneca’s deployment of Mucius as an exemplum of Stoic mastery of mind over body.⁴⁴

The comparison with declamation suggests that we view such moments of closure within particular arguments and literary texts as the equivalent of declamatory performances that offer particular persuasive arguments arising from a theme. These moments of certainty about the meaning of an exemplum represent particular interpretative lines that are temporarily and strategically adopted for a particular moment in time. If we think again of the parallel with declamation, we can appreciate that even the most successful and persuasive declamatory performance will never provide a definitive version of the *controversia* scenario that fixes the Roman understanding of that plot forever. That is simply not what the themes are for. A Roman who wanted to take up the challenge would always be expected to have another go at the theme from another angle. Similarly, exempla can be seen to move easily between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ modes, shutting for a moment as they land in one particular argument, but open again for re-appropriation as soon as that moment is over.⁴⁵

The following chapters (8 and 9) will now equip us with a model for considering the story-tradition that surrounds each exemplum as a heterogeneous site of exemplarity. This will allow us to understand how the consensus surrounding each story is always, like the declamatory rubric, provocatively incomplete. While it establishes that there is a moral value to a story, it does not determine such aspects as how the different

⁴⁴ Elsewhere of course it is absolutely appropriate to wonder about these issues and use the uncertainty to power debate; see [Chapter 12](#).

⁴⁵ We might relate this vacillation to the inherent tensions in exemplary ethics relating to chronology and to exceptionality discussed in [Chapter 1](#).

elements of the story fit together, why the hero acts as he does, where the virtue lies precisely, and what lessons can be conclusively learned. All these aspects need to be re-established every time the exemplum is deployed.

However, as we move into the discussion of memory and orality in the [following chapter](#), it is worth reflecting for a moment on a significant difference between the exemplum and the *controversia* rubric. The declamatory rubric is transmitted as a precise verbal formula, which is preserved in the texts and provides the same starting point for every performer. This is the agreed core around which the declaimer will improvise and elaborate. The transmitted ‘core’ of an exemplum is not so easily pinned down. What can we define as the core elements of the Mucius story? Key elements of the story certainly recur, as we have seen, but there is no exact form of words with which the story is written and inscribed in the tradition; it is not preserved in a single text on which everybody draws. Indeed, although I have been turning to Livy’s account as a canonical version of the legend during the past two chapters – allowing it to inform my knowledge of the legend to which ancient authors are referring when they cite Mucius’ name – discussion in [Chapter 10](#) of the way this legend changes over the first century will show how problematic such reliance on Livy is, as an individual work from a specific historical moment. The story is transmitted through various texts, but also in the far less tangible form of cultural memory, which itself is constantly evolving. The form that the Mucius story takes in Roman cultural memory, at any point, is not something that can be definitively ascertained. Indeed, the elusiveness of this ‘core’ is one of the exemplum’s most significant features. The [following chapter](#) will begin to outline this, drawing on insights and ideas from recent scholarship on cultural memory, and exploring the interplay between oral, performance and written traditions to develop the idea of the site of exemplarity as the heterogeneous and shifting ‘core’ to which all our textual ‘performances’ make reference.

Sites of Exemplarity: Referentiality, Memory, Orality

Thus far I have been describing exempla as powerful stories, but, in fact, usually when we come across an exemplum cited in an ancient text, it is not in the form of a story at all. It is more likely to be in the form of a brief reference, such as *rupisset foedera virgo* ('the maiden broke the treaty', Manilius 4.34 on Cloelia), or even more briefly, *ille Taurea* ('that well-known Taurea' – a reference to a more obscure Capuan figure found in Cicero's speeches, whose story is now harder to reconstruct, Cic. *Pis.* 24, *De leg. agr.* 2).¹ In Chapter 1 we saw that in literary texts exempla often appear as a concise narrative with an interpretative frame that shapes the reading of the narrative in that context. However, even in this narrative form, the text usually does not provide the reader with everything that is needed to make sense of a story. In many cases, there is practically nothing there on the page at all. We rely on the colourful and extended versions of exemplary stories found in authors such as Livy and Plutarch to reconstruct what the Romans meant by such brief references, but those fuller versions are in fact very rare. For the most part when we come across them in ancient literature, exempla are not narrated as stories, but rather cited as references to stories that the audience or the readers are already expected to know. This *referentiality* is a very important characteristic of exempla.

For Seneca the two words *ignem, Mucius* ('Fire, Mucius', Sen. *Ep.* 98.12) are considered to be all that are needed to conjure a meaningful allusion for his reader. Centuries later Claudian's reference to Mucius' exemplum is similarly brief: 'Mucius's flame will teach you.'² All that is needed is a name or an evocative detail, and often not even the name is needed. We might compare the way that in other modern cultures similar motifs can be similarly evocative of stories that are widely shared across cultures: consider the resonance of 'burnt cakes', 'the cherry tree' or 'the twenty four', for

¹ See Morstein-Marx 2004: 72–76.

² *Muci te flamma docebit*, Claudian *Fourth Consulship of Honorius* 404–406 (AD 398).

members of different contemporary cultural communities.³ Such brief mentions are instances of short-hand that make reference to the prior knowledge of readers and audience.

Some of the briefest references to a story such as Mucius' come in sources that are exploring ideas about ethics and the cosmic order. These often ask rhetorical questions that would have no purchase if their readers were not expected to know not only far more of the story than is actually related in these passages themselves, but also aspects of the story such as its place in Roman history and its ethical potency (that is to say, the working consensus about the story discussed in [Chapter 6](#)). In 46 BCE Cicero asks in his philosophical work *Paradoxa Stoicorum*: 'What was it that compelled Gaius Mucius to try and assassinate Porsenna without hope for his own safety?'⁴ A generation later, in the early first century CE, Manilius asks in his *Astronomica*: '[if fate were not directing everything . . .] would Mucius have returned to Rome a victor, with the fire smothered by his wounds?' (. . . *igne sepulto/vulneribus victor repetisset Mucius urbem?*).⁵ These questions imply a shared commitment to the idea that Mucius was compelled by virtue and that his deeds were an important part of what made Rome great. While Cicero's question at least conveys a basic sense of the content of Mucius' deed (attempted assassination), Manilius' description of flame extinguished by wounds would be hard to make sense of without a prior knowledge of the wider story.

Similarly, the questions asked by Seneca, 'Is Mucius a traitor?' (*Mucius proditor?*) or 'Is Mucius unfortunate . . .?' (*infelix est Mucius . . .?*),⁶ would be unanswerable without prior knowledge of a more detailed narrative with which the text itself can be supplemented by a reader. Again, these questions presuppose not just knowledge of the details of what Mucius did, but also a certain moral judgment about his deed. The reader is expected to respond instantly: No, Mucius was not a traitor! No, he cannot be thought unfortunate! Such a reference in the text is little more than an *aide-mémoire* to a story and its ethical connotations that are expected to be known already. They refer the reader outside the text, to a broader 'extratextual' tradition, that includes other literary works but also knowledge passed around in other media, including orally.⁷ This is a deceptively simple idea, but it has far-reaching implications for the study of Latin literature. This

³ Respectively referring to a story about King Alfred the Great in the UK, a story about George Washington's honesty in the USA, and the twenty-four tales of filial piety in China.

⁴ *Quae res ad necem Porsennae C. Mucium impulit sine ulla spe salutis suae?* (Cic. *Paradox.* 1.11–12).

⁵ Manilius' *Astronomica* 4.30–31.

⁶ Sen. *Ben.* 4.27 and Sen. *Prov.* 3.5.

⁷ On 'extratextuality' and exempla, see now Langlands 2018.

chapter explores these implications, and sets up a new theoretical framework within which we can make sense of exemplary references across Latin literature.

So the deceptively simple question is: to what do references such as these refer? If we return to the reference to Mucius in Cicero's speech defending Sestius in 56 BCE, just after his return from exile,⁸ we can get a bit more purchase on the question of referentiality. The need for a reader to bring their own prior knowledge to bear on their interpretation of a reference to an exemplum is all the greater when the reference is in the ultra-brief form of many of Seneca's or Cicero's references, and in order for them to fulfil their full rhetorical role of illustrating, clarifying or supporting arguments, references to exempla needed to be instantly meaningful. The requirement that they be instantly meaningful is especially pressing in the context of a speech where the oral delivery means that the moment of reference is fleeting; if you don't 'get' the reference at once you can ask your friends in the audience, but there is no further possibility for research and the moment is lost.

In his speech *Pro Sestio*, Cicero makes a brief reference to Mucius' story, as we saw in the [previous chapter](#): 'C. Mucius alone reached Porsenna's encampment and tried to kill him, at the risk of his own life.' (*C. Mucius solus in castra Porsennae venisset eumque interficere proposita sibi morte conatus esset*). Although the language is entirely different in every respect, the content and tone are very similar to Cicero's allusion to Mucius in the *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, as cited previously. These Ciceronian allusions are considerably more informative than the references found in Seneca, for instance; the *Pro Sestio* reference mentions details of Mucius' attempt to assassinate Porsenna, and refers to that king by name. The concision of the account is admirable, in fact; it is possible to infer key aspects of the narrative from a mere fourteen words.

Yet the story of Mucius is cited here by Cicero to illustrate and strengthen a claim about Roman patriotism and bravery. It is cited as one of a sequence of exempla supporting Cicero's claim that it is inconceivable that he, a Roman consul, could have been afraid to face death, and it is designed to help refute accusations (probably levelled at him by the prosecution) that he should have died rather than survive to go into exile. It is preceded by another (Athenian) exemplum, that employs the technique of argument from lesser to greater:⁹ if daughters of Erechtheus, mere

⁸ On the wider context of the speech, see Kaster 2006.

⁹ On this rhetorical technique, see Quint. *IO* 5.11.10.

girls, were able to face death without cowardice it seems unlikely that he, a man and a consul, and a Roman to boot, was unable to do the same:

... death, which even those Athenian virgins (daughters, I think, of King Erechtheus) are said to have despised for the sake of their country, shall I, a man and consul who has achieved so many great things, shall I fear it?

... mortem, quam etiam virgines Athenis, regis, opinor, Erechthei filiae, pro patria contempsisse dicuntur, ego vir consularis tantis rebus gestis timerem? (Cic. *Sest.* 48).

This Athenian example is accompanied by a sequence of Roman exempla, beginning with that of Mucius and leading through the centuries of Roman history to the very recent past, with a reference to the death only thirty years earlier of P. Licinius Crassus Lusitanicus (who killed himself in 87 BCE after being proscribed by Marius and Cinna), which are cited to demonstrate that this quality of patriotic fearlessness (which he is here attributing to himself) is a notably and famously Roman trait, and an enduring one. The sequence begins with these heroes of old:

Especially when I am a citizen of that same community from which C. Mucius alone reached Porsenna's encampment and tried to kill him, risking his own life. From which, P. Decius, first the father and then a few years later the son endowed with the same patriotic virtue, sacrificed himself and his life when the battle lines were drawn up, for the sake of the Roman people and victory.

praesertim cum eius essem civitatis ex qua C. Mucius solus in castra Porsennae venisset eumque interficere proposita sibi morte conatus esset; ex qua P. Decius primum pater, post aliquot annos patria virtute praeditus filius se ac vitam suam instructa acie pro salute populi Romani victoriaque devovisset (Cic. *Sest.* 48).

These exempla are explicitly cited to stir up feelings of civic pride, with the repeated *ex qua* and finally *in qua*. In the context of a performed speech, such a claim would fall flat if the stories of Mucius and the Decii were otherwise unknown, and heard here for the first time. In the first place, if these names are able to arouse in the audience a sense of patriotic pride and admiration for heroism that is already associated with the stories, this will greatly enhance the rhetorical power of the references to them. Even more fundamentally however, to be persuaded by Cicero's argument here, one must acknowledge that Rome's history of patriotic heroism is well established. In the context of this speech, the force of the references rests upon the idea that these stories constitute a shared Roman history, that 'we all

know' and that helps to characterise what it means to be Roman. The stories of Mucius and the Decii are only the earliest or best known in a tradition that is depicted as extending through countless similar tales right up to living memory of the audience (*meminisse*):

From which numerous others, partly in order to gain praise, partly to avoid shame, sought death in many different wars, with steadfast courage; in the community in which I myself remember the father of this man, Marcus Crassus, the bravest of men, so that he might not live to see his enemy triumphant, took his own life with the same hand with which he had often laid low his enemies.

ex qua innumerabiles alii partim adipiscendae laudis, partim vitandae turpitudinis causa mortem in variis bellis aequissimis animis oppetissent; in qua civitate ipse meminissem patrem huius M. Crassi, fortissimum virum, ne videret victorem vivus inimicum, eadem sibi manu vitam exhausisse qua mortem saepe hostibus obtulisset (Cic. *Sest.* 48).

Different kinds of exempla are here treated differently. With the first exemplum in Cicero's list, the Athenian foundation legend, Cicero drops in the word *opinor* ('I think'), so as to equivocate, distance himself from this foreign tale, and acknowledge that this story is not one with which his audience of Romans and Italians would necessarily be expected to be familiar.¹⁰ The Roman material, on the other hand, is presented as important cultural knowledge that he assumes on the part of his audience members – as key episodes in Roman history. It is presented as what I call 'mandatory cultural knowledge', and this assumption of familiarity has its own rhetorical and cultural force. Those listeners in the audience of Cicero's speech who did not already know the story would still have been able to make sense of its citation here – it is clear from the context what we are supposed to make of it – but they would also have felt the pressure to learn more about the stories that were being bandied about with such ease, lest they be excluded from important cultural understanding.¹¹ Finally, at

¹⁰ Kaster 2006: 228–229: 'Here and elsewhere C[icero] qualifies such reference[s] ("I think") to avoid parading his knowledge of Greek literary and philosophical culture.' Cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 1.116 and *Fin.* 5.62.

¹¹ As Catherine Steel has pointed out to me, the audience does not necessarily need to know the stories behind the names, nor to be able to flesh out the *innumerabiles alii* with specific names and stories of other Roman heroes, in order to get the point. The bombardment with names, the sequences of references, the claim of numerous further unspoken examples, all carry their own rhetorical weight. The concept of the exemplary bounty of Roman history is its own shared cultural knowledge, which stands independent of any particular story. A modern parallel might be the array of the venerable oil portraits on the walls of a Cambridge college dining hall or a private members' club. Such a display creates its own effect of tradition, achievements and membership of an elite institution, whose

the end of this sequence of exempla, Cicero gives us a reference to recent living memory, and to an event that Cicero remembers himself from his youth; presumably many of his audience either remember it too, or have heard directly about it from others who do. In this last case, the reference is clearly not to a specific text, but to the personal or communicative memory of the audience.¹² The speech context of the *Pro Sestio* makes it clear that in a performative context, with a mixed audience, and references to recent events, these are not references to specific texts, but to something that exists outside texts.

This kind of reference, then, takes us beyond intertextuality. The topic of intertextuality and reference to historical events has been the subject of some interesting work in the last few years by scholars working on ancient Roman historiography.¹³ In an important contribution, Cynthia Damon's stimulating 2010 article 'Déjà vu or Déjà lu?' nicely opened up the question of what the implications are when historians make allusions to past events and those allusions are not to specific texts. In these cases, the allusion is not to a text, but to something wider than text, as Damon puts it: 'The (memory of the) event itself seems to be the source' (Damon 2010: 384). Damon's article explores the idea that historical events exist outside texts:

Historical events, however, survive, in memory at least, almost independent of any given narrative; if Fabius Pictor's contemporary account of the Second Punic War is lost, for example, the war's crucial events are nevertheless known from subsequent narratives that build on Pictor's (and

impact is independent from any detailed knowledge one might have about the individuals who are portrayed in the portraits. However, it is also important that one does believe that such knowledge exists even if one does not fully grasp it oneself. Such knowledge would enhance one's experience of the display, and if one were to discover that there was no information whatsoever to be learned about any of the notables on display it would radically undermine one's experience of admiration or belonging.

¹² For the idea of 'communicative' memory developed by Aleida and Jan Assman to distinguish the more recent memories passed down through personal interactions and influence by personal memories from the more institutionalised, externalised and longer-term 'cultural memory', see J. Assman 2008. Cf. Walter 2004: 113 discussing the floating gap between communicative and cultural memory in relation to Roman exempla, and expressing the idea that there is a key distinction to be made between recent informal memory and formal cultural memory that celebrates the more remote past. Communicative memory is informed by cultural memory, so that recent events are understood in terms of the interpretative structures established through familiarity with cultural memory; in the Roman context, this entails remembering recent events in the form of exempla.

¹³ In addition to Damon 2010, discussed extensively in what follows, see Marincola 2005; O'Gorman 2009; Jaeger 2010 (on 'topographically enhanced intertextuality', p. 16); Marincola 2010, who describes the exemplum as 'a prime intertextual device' (p. 287), the articles in Polleichtner 2010, Levene 2012, the articles in Baraz and van den Berg 2013, and the *Histos* working papers: Levene 2011, Chaplin 2013.

others'), from allusions to those events in other sorts of work (speeches, poems, letters), and from the material record, to list only the most obvious sources (Damon 2010: 376).

The focus of Damon's argument are Tacitus' allusions to Catiline and his engagement with Sallust's earlier written representation of this historical figure, and she makes the subtle point that even when there is a particular written intertext in view (as Sallust's *Catiline* might be for Tacitus) so that knowledge of the past event is reached through particular texts – 'window texts' – it is still understood that that past event has a reality that exists beyond any specific text. This brings a special quality to historical references. Roman exempla also share in this quality because they too refer to events and people that claim to be historical – even if we now may be sceptical about their actual historicity.

Damon asks: 'Why bring Sallust's *Catiline* into the picture at all then? Perhaps because the reference is not to Sallust's *Catiline* per se, but through Sallust's *Catiline* to Catiline himself. (Or, more precisely, to the historical tradition on Catiline as preserved in a variety of sources available to the historian).'¹⁴ So what is this 'historical tradition' as a point of reference? Damon's neat titular formulation 'Déjà vu or Déjà lu?' makes a very helpful distinction between a reference to a written text, and a reference to the past event itself. However, it somewhat glosses over an important point: one cannot have allusions to 'the events themselves' that are unmediated. One can only have references to *knowledge* of those events that one's audience has, or accounts of those events, whether these are written or transmitted in some other way, perhaps through oral communication.

Returning to the case of the *Pro Sestio* and the reference to Mucius, for instance, it is clear that Cicero's audience are not expected to have direct personal memory of his attempted assassination of Porsenna, which, if it happened at all, took place hundreds of years earlier. The reference here is neither to a specific text, nor to direct memory of a real event. Rather it is to shared knowledge about Mucius' story that the audience is expected to possess. In other words, a third category needs to be added to Damon's *deja lu* ('already read', coming direct from intertext) and *déjà vu* ('already seen', through personal memory of the past): I suggest '*déjà su*', 'already known about' – the cultural knowledge or memory that members of the culture share. Insightful though it is, Damon's discussion glosses over this 'cultural knowledge' that is separate *both* from the actual past event itself *and* from textual accounts of it, and her argument does not fully take into account

¹⁴ Damon 2010: 377.

the related idea that past events are always ‘mediated’ even if by witness statements or personal memory; we *never* actually have direct access to the ‘events themselves.’ Damon herself half acknowledges this deficiency in her account; concepts such as ‘memory’ and ‘tradition’ – that is the non-textual mediations of the past – keep intruding into her argument, even though she keeps them at bay by putting them in parentheses: as in her sentence : ‘The (memory of the) event itself seems to be the source.’¹⁵

Building on Damon’s insights, my approach to exempla here will bring memory and tradition out of the parentheses and into the main discussion. The focus in this and the following chapter is mediation of the past – and the argument will replace the rather vague terms of ‘tradition’ and ‘memory’ with the more robust formulation of the ‘site of exemplarity’. This new formulation closely relates to the concept of the ‘site of memory’, as it has been recently developed by scholars such as Ann Rigney and Laura Basu.¹⁶ The concept of the *lieu de mémoire* originated in the influential work of Pierre Nora in the 1980s, to describe symbolic locations (such as the Arc de Triomphe or the Dictionnaire Larousse) around which collective memories crystallised within a community. For Nora, these were a particular feature of a post-industrial literate society (specifically France), which had experienced the fragmentation of the communal memory that had previously developed in peasant society within oral tradition. *Lieux de mémoire* are in contrast to the previously existing *milieux de mémoire* (‘real environments of memory’), such as the collective memory of the peasant culture. *Lieux de mémoire* (which include physical monuments but also celebrations, anniversaries and other commemorative practices) are seen as deliberately created material monuments to the past, nostalgic archives that have been generated by a culture in place of the spontaneous memory that operated in pre-industrial France.¹⁷

Following recent scholarship on cultural memory which further develops Nora’s initial model, and applies it to other cultures, in my formulation ‘sites of exemplarity’ a ‘site’ is not a physical location or even a particular commemorative medium, but a more abstract realm of memory and imagination; it is part of the field of reference to which a reader or listener has recourse when they encounter an allusion to a particular exemplary story or figure.¹⁸ Thus the ‘site’ of Robin Hood discussed in this and in the

¹⁵ Damon 2010: 384. ¹⁶ Rigney 2008, Erll and Rigney 2009, Basu 2012; Rigney 2012.

¹⁷ Nora 1989. For an application of Nora’s concept to Roman cultural memory of the late Republic, see Walter 2004, chapter 5 and his discussion of ‘memory sites’ related to particular locations, such as the hut of Romulus and the Aventine hill.

¹⁸ Cf. Erll and Rigney 2009.

[following chapter](#) (although of course it also has specific topographical associations with Sherwood Forest) would describe the entirety of communal knowledge and memory about that figure and his life. This is maintained in the circulation, discussion and reworking of books, paintings, plays, scholarly discussion, cartoons, films and so on, which in turn – in a mutually supportive relationship – continually reconstitute the interpretative context in which those media (‘remediations’) are made meaningful. This site is generally accessible by all members of a community, but each individual will access it in a slightly different way. The term ‘site’ might seem to imply something static, so it is important to bear in mind the ever-changing nature of these sites within a culture, as well as the fact that they are capable of disappearing without a trace, like sandcastles swept away by the surf, as cultures change and new priorities emerge, as we shall see in the [following chapter](#).

One thing that can make the study of exempla confusing is that in ancient Rome the ‘exemplum’ is both the content of the memory or site (the deed or person considered worthy of remembrance) and also a kind of medium in itself (a ‘tellable tale’, as I shall argue). It is a particular mode for remembering and sharing meaningful memories and narratives across culture. The concept of the site of exemplarity helps us to distinguish between these two facets of the exemplum. The site of exemplarity is the amorphous entirety of the story-tradition surrounding a particular figure or anecdote, incorporating many different versions in different media, and with details and significance shifting over time. I will usually use the word ‘exemplum’ to refer to individual references that are made to a site of exemplarity, where a text (or in some cases speech, performance or visual artefact) is employing an exemplary mode. It is also the case that an exemplum can be found in a text that uses the exemplary mode but does not make reference to a specific site of exemplarity. This is often the case, for instance, when authors identify as exempla people or stories that are hitherto unknown, or too recent to have developed an established tradition.¹⁹ Nevertheless, even without reference to a specific site of exemplarity, such an exemplum can participate in the tradition through reference to the broader terrain of exemplarity (to continue the spatial metaphor): the broader field of exemplary reference within which all the multiple sites of exemplarity are located. For this broader field encompasses

¹⁹ This phenomenon is particularly prevalent towards the end of the first century, when authors make a point of needing to create new exempla for a new era; and it is also common where the exemplary figures referred to are living members of the close community or family; for more on this aspect of Roman exemplary ethics, see Langlands [2014](#), Langlands [forthcoming](#).

not only specific sites of exemplarity but also the familiar transferable exemplary motifs, narrative patterns and cultural schemata from which exempla are built. Even anonymous or unknown exempla can be made meaningful through reference to this exemplary field – it can be thought of as a kind of ‘horizon of expectation’ particular to the creation and interpretation of exempla.

In summary, returning once again to the *Pro Sestio*: members of Cicero’s audience are directed by this reference to Mucius not to a specific intertext, nor even to a single more detailed unwritten narrative about Mucius, but rather to a broader, more complex and less tangible allusive field, a site of exemplarity within Roman cultural memory. Like a site of memory, a site of exemplarity does not rely on or derive from a single canonical text, it is heterogeneous, and made up of a range of different versions of the event and references to that event. The site of exemplarity for Mucius, for instance, would have been made up of a collection of different variants and retellings of the story of Mucius depicted in and transferring between a variety of different media, which may have included theatrical performance, painting and sculpture, and funeral and religious rites, as well as literature and written history.²⁰ Each of these is a specific ‘remediation’ of the site, in the terminology used in recent studies of cultural memory; taken together these remediations generate a heterogeneity within the site that encompasses a diversity of accounts, representations and interpretations of the event.²¹ Further, the site of exemplarity would have been complex: details of the stories would have been contested among variants; and the site would also have been constantly in flux, changing with historical and cultural transition, subject to rupture and forgetting, as the following chapter will outline. Within Roman culture, a site of exemplarity constitutes not so much a *point* of reference as a heterogeneous *field* of reference, whose terrain, moreover, is also always shifting. These sites of exemplarity usually contain some kind of inherent conflict and inconsistency. This corresponds to the ‘functional ambiguity’ of the moral tale that we saw in Chapter 2, and has been identified in recent scholarship as precisely the feature that keeps a site of memory alive and relevant over time;²² its particular function as a feature of Roman exemplarity is explored in later chapters.

²⁰ Cf. Damon 2010: 376: ‘if Fabius Pictor’s contemporary account of the Second Punic War is lost, for example, the war’s crucial events are nevertheless known from subsequent narratives that build on Pictor’s (and others’), from allusions to those events in other sorts of work (speeches, poems, letters), and from the material record, to list only the most obvious sources.’

²¹ See Erll and Rigney 2009. ²² Basu 2009, 2012.

This present chapter will explore some of the implications of this claim that exempla were part of Roman cultural memory in this rather particular way – as highly familiar core cultural knowledge that existed as a complex site. It will establish that it was this status that enabled the referential nature of their presence in written texts, and show how an appreciation of this infrastructure of sites of exemplarity helps us to understand specific references to exempla in ancient literature, by linking them to such wider sites and their wider implications. This newly synthesised theoretical framework also provides a means for further elucidating the co-existence of consensus and indeterminacy in the exempla tradition, outlined in the previous chapters. This current chapter also establishes the methodological basis for analysis in subsequent chapters, which will often take as the unit of analysis, rather than one particular text, the whole site of exemplarity, that is to say the entire complex tradition that surrounds a given exemplary tale or figure.

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In order to clarify the concept of the site of memory and show its significance for ancient exempla, I will start by discussing the legend of Robin Hood as a familiar modern day example of a memory site that provides an illuminating parallel for the Roman exempla.²³ Robin Hood is an English hero (with a global profile) whose legend unfolds in a particular historical setting. Like Mucius Scaevola, he is remembered as a historical figure (more on this later) who lived in a specific place and time: Sherwood forest during the era of the Crusades. He is said to have lived hundreds of years before the present day, just as Mucius and the other legendary heroes of the early Republic are said to have lived in a specific historical context about five hundred years before the days when authors such as Cicero and Livy make reference to them. The figure of Robin Hood, despite his historical status, is also one that is subject to extensive mythological and fictionalising elaboration; we feel comfortable revising and retelling his story, for instance, in films, plays and children's books. I expect all my readers one way or another to be familiar with this legend, and this familiarity makes it possible to reflect on one's own experience of acquiring

²³ Much current scholarship developing ideas about cultural memory focuses on contemporary memory of relatively recent history, such as the Second World War, investigating the point at which communicative history becomes cultural (see n. 12). Robin Hood might seem to fall more into the category of the legend or myth, but, as in the case of Roman exempla, part of the appeal of the Robin Hood story lies in its purported historicity; it therefore provides a useful parallel to the Roman stories that are the focus of this book. On cultural memory and Robin Hood, see Knight 2006, on which I will draw in what follows.

and using cultural knowledge of this kind, and to consider the wider cultural and historical context which frames this personal experience. This in turn should help to give substance to rather abstract claims about cultural memory, and bring out their further implications for Roman exempla.

Like Roman exempla, the legend of Robin Hood is generally first encountered when one is a very young child, so that the field of reference begins to be established in early childhood. The legend is likely to be framed as mandatory cultural knowledge from the beginning; discussion with parents and peers in the playground will communicate the importance of being able to 'get' the reference and deploy one's knowledge of it. One is therefore primed from a young age to pick up and integrate further references into one's knowledge of the story, and the site is highly familiar by the time one reaches adulthood. It is usually hard to trace one's first encounter with such a culturally embedded site, not least because its status as mandatory cultural knowledge encourages one to feel that one has always known about it. However, over the past few years I have been able to observe my own children's acquisition of knowledge about Robin Hood. They first came across it when they attended a performance of Tennyson's 1881 play *The Foresters*.²⁴ There they were introduced to the characters: noble Robin Hood, dressed in green, spirited Marian, the wicked Sheriff of Nottingham, lustful King John, and Friar Tuck (always thinking of his next meal). Discussion and explanation of the characters and aspects of Tennyson's plot by me and by other adults reinforced the message that everybody knew about them, and that these were worth learning about in a way that the plots and characters of other plays and books might not be; this legend clearly had special cultural status. This initial encounter then established the reference points for their subsequent readings of illustrated books from the library about the legend of Robin Hood. Drawn to a legend which they know has cultural status and with which they are increasingly familiar, the children continue to bring home new books about Robin Hood from school and from the library, and to encounter new versions of the story, various literary and visual depictions of the characters, that display variation, although they are usually working with similar themes and ideas. Most recently they watched a Tom and Jerry feature length cartoon with a Robin Hood theme, which was easily recognisable to them by now as a pastiche of the legend, working against the background of a tale assumed already to be familiar to its viewers.

²⁴ A performance by the Stansted Players in 2011 for which I provided the sound effects.

An elaborate pastiche such as this represents a rather different kind of reference to the site of memory from the brief allusion to Mucius' tale by Cicero in the *Pro Sestio*. However it too makes the assumption that its audience (in this case primarily children) will know what it is referring to.

The site of memory and the individual remediations of the site are mutually supportive and exist in dialogue with each other. Although a reference such as the Tom and Jerry film makes an allusion to the site of memory as if the legend of Robin Hood were a hypotext lying behind it,²⁵ it also at the same time makes its own contribution to the memory site as it is experienced by (in this case) my children. For them, the Tom and Jerry film is the latest addition to the body of remediations of the Robin Hood legend that they have encountered over their lifetime and from which they are piecing together their overall understanding of the legend's content and significance. An individual's knowledge of Robin Hood is made up from all the different versions of the story that he or she has encountered until now, some of which will be more powerful and influential than others. Each takes the prior existence of the story as a backdrop, some position themselves as more authoritative versions, others as pastiches or satire working with the material. Through comparing all these variants, a child can move towards an understanding of essential elements of that story, including its cultural and moral significance. This understanding synthesises the individual remediations and appreciates where they converge, and where the centre of gravity lies among the different variants and represents an individual's share in the working consensus surrounding a site. Thus there is no Ur-story, only various remediations, some more influential than others, which constitute a site of memory. This ties in with Damon's question about references to historical events: the answer is that, where the reference is to something historical, some texts are influential and provide important remediations which can function like specific intertexts, but there is always a site of memory to which these belong that lies behind both hypertext and hypotext. There is nothing more tangible to refer to than a communally agreed consensus about the centre of gravity at any particular time.

Broadly, within a culture, new remediations refer to a site of memory (and are to be interpreted with reference to that existing site) but they also themselves contribute to the evolving site of memory. As Laura Basu has put it, referring to cultural memory in societies today: 'Lieux de mémoires derive their meaning only within the context of (increasingly globalised)

²⁵ On hypotexts and hypertexts, see Genette 1997.

media cultures. Medial representations surround, constitute and modify sites of memory.²⁶ It will be important to bear in mind this interpretative dialogue between site and remediations or references when we are analysing the individual textual references to exempla in ancient literature throughout this book. It was already clear to my six-year-old daughter that there are a number of different variants of Robin Hood's life and adventures in circulation, which differ in some respects and emphasise different aspects of the tradition. Sometimes the versions conflict with one another in their detail. At one point my daughter brought home a school book and noted that this latest version had made a mistake by describing Robin and Little John as childhood friends, whereas the book she had borrowed earlier from the library had located the meeting of the two men in adulthood when they fight on a bridge. Indeed, this latter version is the most commonly found in the tradition. By that point, her basic knowledge of the story had already been established; therefore although each new remediation of, or reference to, Robin Hood would further build up her understanding, she was unlikely to modify her knowledge of its details significantly, except to further nuance her grasp of it as a complex and contested tradition, and to reflect on the implications of those variations.

In a further useful parallel with Roman exempla, the Robin Hood site is also a vehicle for the communication of moral values. As she learned about its narrative content, my daughter, perhaps without being aware of it, had been introduced to concepts such as social inequality and social justice, friendship, loyalty, bravery and the heritage of the English countryside that are (currently at least) associated with it. By then she was already well equipped to deploy references to the site in her own social interactions, making use of this site of memory as common currency, through participation in the common working consensus that surrounds it.

For although my daughter's experience of getting to know the tradition is unique to her, and each individual member of a community will build up their own personal version of this knowledge of Robin Hood, depending on their lifetime of encounters and conversation, it is nevertheless of the utmost importance that such knowledge be something that all members of a community feel they share and hold in common – it constitutes mandatory cultural knowledge. This is the kind of widely shared knowledge that by and large we expect all members of society to possess. Indeed, if we find that someone has not heard of Robin Hood (this is true in Britain at least) we are likely to feel disconcerted and to worry that such a person is not

²⁶ Basu 2012: 131.

properly integrated into the community, and has a significant hole in their basic cultural knowledge. The pressure to acquire this knowledge further reinforces the ideological messages of such prized stories. Despite the variation among the versions of the story that we will each have come across, and despite our tacit acceptance that there are many versions of the story and no one definitive account, we are able to come to enough of an agreement about the legend of Robin Hood to use it as a shared reference point.

If I were to happen upon any gathering of people in Britain today – in a supermarket, a classroom, or a crowd at a football match – and persuade them to stop what they were doing for a moment and share their knowledge of Robin Hood with me and with each other, not only am I confident that they would recognise the name and understand what I was asking them, but I am sure that we could quickly establish a good core level of consensus about what the key elements of his story are and what their significance is: the outlaw skilled in archery, dressed in Lincoln green, camping out in Sherwood Forest, with his motley band of companions the Merry Men, enjoying the love interest of Maid Marian, standing up to his enemy, the wicked Sheriff of Nottingham, falling upon the rich hypocrites who travel through the forest, robbing them of their money in order to give it to the poor and needy. Some of my new friends might sing (I know I often do) a snatch of the memorable theme tune from the 1950s TV series *The Adventures of Robin Hood*: ‘Robin Hood, Robin Hood, riding through the glen, Robin Hood, Robin Hood, with his band of men. Feared by the bad! Loved by the good! Robin Hood! Robin Hood! Robin Hooooood!’ Importantly, we are also likely to share associations of the story with certain political and social ideas, even ideologies; the phrase ‘robbing from the rich to give to the poor’ is resonant, and brings with it certain implications about social justice and ethics. As with Roman exempla, this ideological charge renders the sites engaging, since they thereby present themselves as bearers of important cultural values and understanding.

We will find that we all share knowledge of roughly the same thing, although no one person will have exactly the same ideas about Robin Hood as another. As we saw in [Chapter 6](#), such sites are like a shared language, which rely on a certain level of working consensus about the meaning of each word in order to function, whilst acknowledging that semantic meaning can be ambiguous, complicated and subject to change. Such consensus may be achieved partly through the particular media through which the story is communicated, some of which may be particularly influential at a certain moment, and entrench certain variants and details as dominant.

Nowadays the cinematic and televisual versions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are likely to be instrumental in establishing and circulating certain ideas about Robin Hood, and different generations are more likely to have their ideas shaped by particular cinematic mediations. At any one time, the site of memory or site of exemplarity has a centre of gravity around which the various versions and alternative details and explanations for the story converge. This coalescence around the site's centre of gravitational pull gives the site enough substance that it can be shared and handled by everyone as a solid entity; however it also allows for variation within the whole ensemble, with some variants as outliers at a distance from general consensus. A site will also incorporate uncertainty and disagreement over some aspects, so that there is also an element of instability to this substantial core of consensus around the story. This area of convergence is the area of reference for the site, but it can shift from day to day, and be different for different groups and communities within a single culture.

It is significant that our shared knowledge of the legend of Robin Hood does not come from one single authoritative and canonical text (although it may be significantly shaped by particular texts and remediations, as I have suggested). Rather it is derived from a variety of sources during one's childhood and then over the course of one's lifetime. It falls into the category of popular and common knowledge, rather than specialised knowledge or high culture acquired through advanced formal education, and mediated by experts. Like fairy-tales and folklore, it is the kind of knowledge of which ordinary lay people are happy to take full possession, handling it, shaping it and passing it on to their peers or their children. It belongs to everyone equally, and does not need to be transmitted through authoritative guardians of knowledge such as teachers, religious leaders or scholars.²⁷ Such stories are open to interpretation by all members of a community and we are all allowed to retell our own versions and make sense of them for ourselves. As in the case of modern jokes, urban myths, folk-tales and fairy-tales, anyone could use Roman exempla, and anyone could pass them on. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), even if particular details of a story may originate in an elite authored text with an explicit political agenda – this is the case with many Roman exemplary tales, as well as central aspects of the tradition currently associated with Robin Hood, as we shall see – nevertheless, to gain traction as cultural memory, a story and

²⁷ Cf. Welch 2013: 79, on the way that Valerius Maximus' 'anti-intertextuality functions not only aesthetically, as a statement about texts and creation, but also socially, as a statement about who may participate in Roman culture'.

its details must be made communal, that is to say co-opted into popular traditions that serve the needs of non-elite members of the community as well.²⁸ This communal element also makes such traditional narratives susceptible to constant change and amendment as each new teller makes them their own and adds their own twist or personal touch. This ‘portability’ is also characteristic of the transmission of folk-tales and fairy-tales.²⁹ Like other popular and communal genres, both the legend of Robin Hood and Roman exempla were designed to be remembered and communicated with ease, with their concision and their memorable features and formulaic structures.³⁰ Exempla, then, are the kind of stories one tends to tell and tell again (‘tellable tales’), rather than the kind one records in elaborate literary form.

Many of the stories in the exemplary corpus may be elaborated in some texts into extensive literary narratives, especially in narrative histories such as Livy’s *Histories*. However, their presence in the ancient texts, as we have seen, is *primarily* referential. This provides an indication that these exemplary stories are first and foremost the kind of stories that are told and heard – circulated in a punchy, pointed, memorable oral medium – rather than the kind of stories that one expects to read as literature. In his study of modern urban myths, Jan Harold Brunwand draws attention to the distinction between literature and modern folklore in the case of ghost stories: ‘A literary ghost story such as Washington Irving’s “Legend of Sleepy Hollow” makes a fine schoolbook piece’, he writes, ‘but being frozen in print and remote in setting it could never keep pace with the ghost and horror lore in oral tradition. Schoolchildren read Irving’s story (at least when they are required to), but they do not tell it. They certainly do tell “The Death Car” and “The Vanishing Hitchhiker”.’³¹ These latter ghost stories are ones that many of us will be familiar with from our own early adolescence; as Brunwand notes, their emphases and details change in relation to social changes such as the emergence of new technologies.³²

²⁸ For a similar process at work in the first century CE, see Milnor 2014, especially chapter 5, on the way that graffiti in Pompeii takes popular ownership of well-known works of literature, such as the poetry of Ovid, Propertius, Virgil and Ennius.

²⁹ See Carter 2005, Taylor 2003 on this characteristic of portability in other folk traditions.

³⁰ Cf. the work of folklorists Iona and Peter Opie on the transmission and sharing of children’s games and songs in the school playgrounds of twentieth-century Britain; they document the astonishing speed with which new adaptations of familiar songs can be circulated in the playground, and also the coverage that motifs get across the country – well before the internet and the proliferation of social media (Opie and Opie 1959).

³¹ Brunwand 1983: 38. I thank my colleague Karen ní Mheallaigh for lending me this engaging book.

³² See Brunwand 1983: 8, 187–191 on modern urban myths about ghostly hitchhikers, murderous babysitters and death at the drive-in movie, and the way details in the narratives change over the

Brunwand traces changes that have taken place up to the 1980s, when I heard them round the campfire as a teenager, but there is no doubt that they will have further evolved in the decades since then. Brunwand's phrase 'frozen in print' suggests the idea that a written text such as Irvine's short-story is less malleable and adaptable than stories circulated orally, and so draws attention to the different capacities of the two media: texts can endure unchanged, which enables them to provide a valuable connection to an earlier time, but by the same token they risk becoming less relevant in the face of cultural change, and may need to be rewritten and reinterpreted.

It is not merely the medium that is at issue here, it is also the form that a story takes. The complex plot of a novel or a short story has a very different kind of weight and texture than the story that is eagerly repeated round the campfire or in the pub. The latter 'tellable' form of story may of course be expanded and developed into a full literary version, just as a compelling literary narrative may be boiled down and recast into a form fit for oral circulation (and there must be narrative forms that fall between the two). However, they are distinct types of narrative. Even if a written text can be highly influential on popular knowledge of a story,³³ it does so through a process of adaptation, where it is taken up into the oral tradition, reduced to memorable details and folk motifs, and given a clear moral or message. In order for this to happen the story cannot have too many characters or too many plot twists; it needs to be capable of being told quite quickly and of sustaining the curiosity of the listener throughout. Ancient Roman exempla, though they may obviously often be woven into more elaborate literary accounts (that may also dissipate their exemplary power), are primarily tellable tales, and this is significant.³⁴

The oral and informal aspect of this kind of popular historical knowledge is fundamentally important. My daughter's grasp of the Robin Hood memory site has been reached through encounters with various remediations including theatre, literature and cartoons. However, vital for getting her to this point of cultural competence has been her discussions of the books and films and the legend of Robin Hood with her parents, brother, grandparents, friends and teachers, all of which have guided and reinforced

course of the twentieth century in response to social change, such as changing role of the police, the automobile, or the emergence of new technologies.

³³ As we shall see in the following chapter in the cases of Thomas Love Peacock's influence on the tradition surrounding Robin Hood, or Livy's *Histories* and Mucius' site of exemplarity.

³⁴ See also Maslakov 1984, on the way that historical material needs to be shorn of content and context, in order to work as an exemplum.

her interpretation of and interactions with the literary and cinematic and televisual media.

Indeed, a popular site of memory such as ‘Robin Hood’ thrives outside the more formal and durable archive (and certainly outside the public and official commemoration that is often the medium of cultural memory).³⁵ Both its content and its significance are, of course, established and circulated in ‘archive’ media such as popular literature and film, but it also has an extensive life beyond these media, in oral and ephemeral form such as conversation, bedtime stories, casual references in newspaper articles and so on. It is even boiled down into a trope ‘robbing from the rich to give to the poor’ that has been adopted into everyday parlance; as I have mentioned, this portable and powerful ideological trope is an aspect of the Robin Hood site that is shared with many Roman exempla.³⁶ It is important to emphasise here the extent to which a site of memory is still established and maintained orally, through casual and ephemeral means, even in our twenty-first century society of mass media and vast archives.³⁷ While more durable media such as films and books might have been highly influential on our grasp of the legend of Robin Hood, their impact relies on the support of the ephemeral references and conversations that make sense of these cinematic and literary mediations, and cement their place in our knowledge of Robin Hood. The site of cultural memory that is ‘Robin Hood’ is also sustained not only through developed and detailed accounts of the legend, but also through innumerable brief references which one picks up along the way, which assume prior knowledge of the story in its entirety. This idea of constant exposure to brief references to a site is highly significant for thinking about Roman exempla too.³⁸

The films that I saw twenty or thirty years ago have been able to shape my knowledge of Robin Hood as they have, only because of constant reinforcement by more ephemeral cultural and social encounters, including all those informal and unrecorded conversations that I will have had over the years with my friends and family about the significance of what

³⁵ See Winter 2008 on official commemoration and its distinction from popular memory. On the distinction between the actively circulated canon and the passively preserved archive, see A. Assman 2008.

³⁶ E.g. *Manliana imperia* as a byword for strictness (see further Chapter 13); on Roman exemplary figures as commonplaces, see Otto 1890.

³⁷ Cf. Brunwand 1983, on the way that urban legends continue to circulate and develop in oral form regardless of the literate society, and also the way such oral mediations interact with written media, such as newspaper articles and websites (especially pp. 75–101).

³⁸ And cf. Taylor 2003: 17, on pre-colonial Latin American cultures: ‘[W]riting was far more dependent on embodied culture for transmission than the other way around.’

we have seen and read. Cartoons and references in the popular media regularly remind me again of the site of memory in general, as well as of specific remediations of it. The memory and significance of the film (or whatever influential remediation has shaped my knowledge of Robin Hood) is itself dependent on an unrecoverable, ephemeral context. This is why I have dedicated so much space in this chapter to exploring a modern parallel. It is easier to grasp what this 'unrecoverable, ephemeral context' might be if we think of the modern context, where we can at least reflect upon our own personal experience and recover many of the less durable forms of remediation we may have encountered. The 'medial representations' that in Basu's words 'surround, constitute and modify sites of memory'³⁹ must include the informal, casual and ephemeral, whose very ubiquity tells us members of a culture something about the importance of that site of memory. In the case of Roman exempla, of course, we can only recapture a sense of what this might have been by analysing the written texts that survive into the modern age, whose selectivity significantly hampers our endeavour.

Many cultures share stories or motifs through their literature and their formally written histories, public monuments and other commemorative media. To return to the 'referentiality' of the exempla, where I began this chapter, my point about Roman exempla is that these tales had an informal, everyday existence too, being very familiar, widely shared and part of the essential knowledge that one needed to become a full member of the culture who is able to participate meaningfully in cultural practices such as political life (in the most general sense), reading literature, or even chatting with friends. Exempla were so familiar that they cannot be seen as a merely or even primarily textual phenomenon – they must have had a very significant existence in the conversations and everyday thought of members of the Roman community.⁴⁰ Roman exempla are not merely, or even *primarily*, a literary phenomenon – any more than the story of Robin Hood is a solely or primarily a literary phenomenon in twenty-first century England. They were a popular social phenomenon, as well, circulated in non-literary media from state-sponsored performance to idle conversation. The idea that exempla must have had an 'oral' element is not a new one of course, and their formal similarity to folk-tales and fables has also encouraged speculation in the past from scholars that they might have had

³⁹ Basu 2012: 131.

⁴⁰ They are comparable in this respect to the modern urban legend, which has a similar mode of existence; it is primarily circulated in oral form, but also captured in literature and other written record as well; cf. Brunwand 1983, Donovan 2004.

a similar role and status in ancient culture.⁴¹ However, what I am offering here is a new theoretical approach that allows us to explore in depth how this ‘orality’ is relevant to the business of reading and understanding the ancient literature where exempla are mentioned (which is most of Latin literature and quite a lot of Greek literature too).

It is important to understand cultural memory as a framework within which written texts are generated and to which they also contribute.⁴² Texts constitute a particular medium of exemplarity with their own medial characteristics, which engage in interplay with the other forms in which exempla are articulated, circulated and referred to. Those texts that have survived to this day, and that we are able to study directly, functioned in dialogue with many other aspects of ancient culture that do not survive and to which modern scholars no longer have access. However, cultural memory studies provides a theoretical apparatus that allows us to hypothesise how ancient literature might have found its place within the working system of ancient Roman memory and exemplary cultures. The [following chapter](#) reinforces and elaborates this theoretical apparatus by discussing the dynamics of cultural memory, and the way that memory sites are shared and maintained within a culture, as well as thinking specifically about the role of literature within these processes.

⁴¹ On the oral transmission of exempla, see David 1980: 70, Mencacci 2001: 421–422, n. 1 (acknowledging the important role that oral tradition must have played, especially when an exemplary figure occurs in a text only as a brief reference, where it is clear that a mere name is enough ‘to evoke precise details in the collective memory’), Walter 2004: 42–75 on the various media through which exempla might have been transmitted, including family lore, public speeches, banquet songs and historical drama. On the different but related question of how far exempla were part of popular culture, see Morgan 2007a: 129: ‘Exemplary stories are part of popular culture and ethics in so many societies that it is perhaps more likely a priori that they played a role in the Roman world than that they did not.’

⁴² On the role of literary texts in cultural memory more broadly, see Rigney 2012.

The Dynamics of Cultural Memory: Forgetting, Rupture, Contestation

Cultural memory of all kinds is created in and for the present, with all that this implies. It does not operate, as it appears to, by preserving traces of the past or by handing down knowledge about that past through the generations in an unbroken chain. Rather, as recent studies have emphasised, cultural memory is an active process and is ‘performative’, constituting performance in the here and now of the present and of its relation to the past (or better, to a constructed past).¹ Material traces of the past may be utilised in the production of collective memory of course, and may be given particular significance through this process, but in themselves they do not constitute memory, as I shall go on to argue.

This is true even when the event is recent and well-attested, but the point is particularly clear when the event or person being remembered is from the distant past. As we saw in the [previous chapter](#), when Cicero in the *Pro Sestio* makes reference to an event that took place hundreds of years ago – Mucius’ attempt to assassinate Porsenna – it is clear that his audience are not expected to draw on their personal memory of the event or even on the accounts of others who remember it. Rather they are being asked to participate in a current cultural practice, accessing a site of memory. On the broader scale of Roman culture, the culture itself does not remember the event as an individual would, but rather creates a repertoire of ‘remediations’ that help to sustain the knowledge of the event for individual members of a culture and establish that the shared commemoration of the event is culturally important.² Such remediations – in the Roman context monuments, plays, works of literature, funeral processions, ancestor masks with their explanatory labels – are shared touchstones for communal remembering that regularly prompt the informal and oral sharing of

¹ For a helpful articulation of this idea, see the introduction to Erll and Rigney 2009, especially 1–2; see also Rigney 2008 and Taylor 2003.

² On the idea of memorialising accounts of historical events as ‘remediations’ of a site of memory, see the articles in Erll and Rigney 2009.

knowledge about and responses to the site of memory; together with the commemorative materials, such ephemeral responses constitute the site of memory.

Moreover, when we describe texts as a ‘record’ of a historical event, or a sculpture as a ‘monument’ our language implies the preservation of traces of an original event or person, but it is important to bear in mind that the actual texts and monuments – the remediations of the past event – that inform a site of memory, and from which we construct our knowledge of an exemplary story or event, do not themselves ‘remember’, and they cannot themselves transmit or preserve memories or knowledge about the past.³ Rather a monument’s significance and its connection with the past is established only through, and in the context of, particular readings in a given present, and in relation to a particular site of memory.⁴ We need therefore to be careful when we consider the role of individual works of art or texts in transmitting or sustaining cultural memory and be aware of their operation within a broader cultural context.

Let me elucidate some of the implications of this by discussing a striking example: the famous equestrian statue of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, on display today in the Capitoline Museums. This gilded bronze statue depicts a larger than life-size Marcus Aurelius mounted on a horse. The horse’s raised front right hoof used at one time to rest on the figure of a barbarian which has long since disappeared, and this tableau represented, in its original second-century context, Roman triumph over barbarians in what Peter Stewart describes as a typical motif of ‘Roman victory through violence’.⁵ The stability and endurance of the physical entity of the statue over the years – standing virtually unchanged in Rome for almost two thousand years between the second century until the present day – are in stark contrast with the vicissitudes of its interpretation as part of (various) sites of memory. As Peter Stewart says in his recent article: ‘The statue seems to have been continuously above ground and on constant display since it was first produced, which is unusual among ancient sculpture. In the late middle ages, it stood on the Lateran in south-east Rome, and then from 1538 to 1981 at the centre of the Piazza del

³ Even a detailed account such as those we find in Livy’s *Histories* or the 1990 Robin Hood film does not preserve a memory; even though a work such as Livy’s looks like an informative record of the past, it does not maintain direct contact with the past that it represents, and performs no act of preservation and keeping safe over the centuries.

⁴ Cf. Basu 2012 and the discussion of the Indian Mutiny as a site of memory. Her argument has resonance with the approaches of Classical Reception, and indeed theorising that has taken place about reception is highly relevant here (cf. Fisher and Langlands 2015a and 2015b).

⁵ P. Stewart 2012: 266.

Campidoglio. There is not much in the way of repatching so it is very much unchanged from antiquity.⁶ As a monument, this statue appears to be particularly durable and stable in its form.

However, despite the stability of the monument itself, there is severe rupture in the history of its interpretation, and thus in the memory traditions that have surrounded it. In fact, the statue is co-opted by entirely different sites of memory at different moments in that long period. At some point in its history (probably by the fourth century and certainly by the tenth century) the fact that it had been created as a statue representing and commemorating the emperor Marcus Aurelius was forgotten, and that knowledge or memory was overwritten⁷ with a new memory or knowledge: the knowledge that it was the statue of the first Christian emperor, Constantine.⁸ This represents a rupture in the interpretative tradition after which a completely different site of memory was mobilised to make sense of the same ancient commemorative object. The statue may have been originally produced to celebrate the power and military success of Marcus Aurelius, but in the medieval period it no longer could be said to commemorate Marcus at all; rather, it commemorated Constantine, in the sense that it was 'knowledge' about the tradition surrounding the emperor Constantine that was triggered when culturally aware viewers stood before the statue.⁹ Nothing about the statue itself, virtually unchanged though it still stood, was able to communicate its connection to Marcus Aurelius or to conjure up memory of that emperor. To what extent then, could that statue, *during that period*, be said to be a monument of Marcus, or even to represent him at all? The living memory and meaning surrounding the statue, and within which the statue made sense at that time, were those that related to Constantine as a site of memory. Once the previous site of memory is dissipated in the surrounding culture, the monument can no longer be interpreted with reference to it.¹⁰

⁶ P. Stewart 2012: 264.

⁷ The term 'overwritten' comes from the discussion of digital media within memory studies, but is a useful concept for the discussion of oral and other ephemeral media as well. See Hoskins 2009 and especially p. 93 for the phrase 'on-the-fly memory', a metaphor drawn from computer programming.

⁸ P. Stewart 2012: 268; the tenth-century *Liber Pontificalis* mentions the *Caballus Constantini*. It is commonly believed that the statue survived as it did because it was early on identified as a statue of Constantine – this is impossible to verify, as we have no evidence before the tenth century, but it is plausible (P. Stewart 2012: 270).

⁹ Cf. Erll 2009, especially 110–111 for a description of the process that is triggered when a viewer is confronted by the site of memory when they look at a painting of the Indian Mutiny.

¹⁰ Clearly residual information can survive unused in the archive and be reactivated at a later date, and this is what has happened here in the case of this statue, which is now once again known as the statue of Marcus Aurelius.

Nevertheless, the appropriation of the statue as part of the archive relating to the ‘Constantine’ site of memory seems not to have been entirely secure, even while the identification with Marcus was forgotten.¹¹ The chatty medieval guidebook *The Marvels of the City of Rome* (*Mirabilia urbis Romae*) contains a chapter about the statue entitled ‘Why the horse which is known as “Constantine” was made’, purporting to explain the statue’s real origins.¹² Noting that the statue is usually known as ‘The Horse of Constantine’, it goes on to suggest that this is a misidentification, and that a reader who would like to learn ‘the truth’ (*veritatem*) about what the statue represents should read on for an alternative aetiology.¹³ The story that follows purports to reveal the truth about the original events that the statue commemorates, and relates an adventurous tale, which according to the guidebook, took place in ‘the time of senators and consuls’ (*tempore consulum et senatorum*), that is to say: in Republican Rome.¹⁴

During the time of the consuls and senators, an extremely powerful king came from the east to Italy; he besieged Rome on the Lateran side of town; he afflicted the Roman people with great disaster and war. Then a squire, of great beauty and courage, bold and clever, came forward, and he said to the consuls and senators: ‘If someone were to free you from this tribulation, what would he be promised by the senate?’ In response they told him: ‘He would immediately obtain whatever he asked for.’ He said to them: ‘Give me thirty thousand silver sesterces and make me a monument to my victory once the battle is over, and the finest horse.’ They promised him to grant him what he had asked for.

tempore consulum et senatorum, quidam rex potentissimus de Orientis partibus Italiam venit; ex parte Lateranis Romam obsedit; multa strage et bellis populum Romanum afflixit. tunc quidam armiger magne forme et virtutis, audax et prudens surrexit, qui dixit consulibus et senatoribus: “si esset qui liberaret vos de hac tribulatione, quid a senatu promeretur?” qui respondentes dixerunt ei: “quicquid ipse poposcerit mox obtinebit.” qui ait eis: “date michi XXX milia sextertias et memoriam victoriae michi facietis post peractum bellum, et optimum equum.” qui promiserunt se facturos quicquid ipse petierat (*Mirabilia* XV).

¹¹ See Kinney 2002 on various competing aetiologies given for the statue, from the twelfth to the sixteenth century.

¹² *Quare factus sit equus qui dicitur Constantinus* (*Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, chapter XV).

¹³ *Lateranis est quidam caballus hereus qui dicitur Constantini, sed non ita est; quia quicumque voluerit veritatem cognoscere hoc perlegat.*

¹⁴ On this passage, see Kinney 2002 and Hamilton 2012: 15–16 who comments helpfully: ‘the narrative is told with a humor that has not been fully appreciated’, and argues that the tale puns on the Latin terms *adventus* and *fascēs*.

The story explains that this equestrian statue was made as reward, requested by a brave armour-bearer (i.e. a man of low status and not an armed soldier himself) for ridding the city of Rome of the Eastern tyrant who is besieging them. Other specific details of the statue itself are then alluded to in the story that unfolds, during which the squire does indeed succeed in overcoming the enemy king and handing him over to the Romans. The story goes that the king is in the habit of going out every night to empty his bowels under a tree, and there is a little bird (*cocovaie*, variously identified as a cuckoo or an owl) that always calls out and thereby betrays the king's whereabouts. Knowing this, the squire is able to pinpoint the whereabouts of the king at his most vulnerable, and carry him off to the city, calling on the Roman soldiers who are waiting by the walls for his sign to attack the king's men and drive them off. The Romans then reward the squire just as they had promised they would:

So they returned to the city triumphant, and they delivered what they had promised to the squire: 30,000 sesterces and a gilded bronze horse in his memory, with him sitting astride it without a saddle, stretching out the hand with which he had seized the king. On the horse's head there was a monument to the owl whose song had won them the victory. And the king himself, who was a rather small person, was also commemorated with his hands tied behind his back, just as he had been captured, under the horse's hoof.

sic gloriosi ad urbem redierunt, et quod predicto armigero promiserant persolverunt, XXX scilicet milia sextertias et equum hereum pro memoria deauratum et sine sella, ipso desuper residente, extenta manu qua ceperat regem; in capite equi, memoriam cocovaie ad cantum cuius victoriam fecerat. ipsum quoque regem, qui parve persone fuerat, retro ligatis manibus, sicuti eum ceperat, sub ungula memorialiter destinavit (*Mirabilia* XV).

This final description of the statue makes it clear that the whole narrative has been crafted so that its details provide explanation of certain features of the statue that might perplex a viewer: the crucial role played in the tale by the owl in indicating where the king has chosen to empty his bowels that night is there to explain the puzzling bird that appears to be perching between the horse's ears. The lack of saddle is alluded to by the warrior's choice to ride a horse bareback. Most touchingly of all, the small size of the figure cowering under the horse's upraised hoof is explained by the detail that the king was of diminutive stature.¹⁵

¹⁵ See also Kinney 2002: 385 on 'the *ad hoc* story of the armiger' as 'what has been called a "novelistic etiology", an explanation that generates narrative to rationalise enigmatic details.' Kinney also points

The story of this statue and of the varying interpretations it has attracted over the centuries brings home several important points. First, it serves to remind us that *forgetting* is also an important feature of the dynamic process of remembering. As if shedding a dead skin, a culture will keep discarding or overwriting out-dated ideas that no longer work, whether about the site of memory or about a given monument.¹⁶ The statue's story also highlights the importance of not attributing cultural memory with the permanence of a particular commemorative medium. The durability of the statue should not be confused with the memory site itself, which is constantly changing and evolving. In addition, this case makes it clear that in order to commemorate something, any monument or text (any item from the archive or canon, in Aleida Assman's terms) needs an interpretative framework; monuments mean nothing on their own and are not capable of storing or communicating memory of the past.¹⁷ In this case the statue is not even capable of preserving a connection with a particular site of memory. The memory (of Marcus, of Constantine, of the mercenary Roman squire) is not contained *within* the statue or the monument. A monument such as the statue of Marcus Aurelius becomes significant, and triggers 'memory', only in the light of already held knowledge relating to a relevant memory site. The monument makes reference to a memory only in so far as there is a referential structure maintained within which it can be interpreted.

Such a referential structure or interpretative context may of course be newly generated or reconfigured in response to the need to explain the monument itself. Often an imposing cultural artefact like an equestrian statue may be recognisable as commemorative even while the detail of what it commemorates is unclear. In the case of Marcus' statue, the medieval guidebook's interpretation highlights the process by which the stories about monuments that provide this interpretative framework may be generated through an attempt to make sense of puzzling details in the monument itself: here, for instance the little bird or the size of the

out that another puzzling detail for the medieval viewer would have been the apparent discrepancy between the grandeur of the horse and the unarmed rider, which the story explains by making the hero a humble *armiger* (385–386).

¹⁶ Frow 1997, Rigney and Erll 2009: 7 on chapter by Hoskins: 'since digitised information is highly unstable, being regularly rewritten and over-written, it is constantly eliding as well as producing memory' (see n. 7).

¹⁷ See Winter 2008: 72–73 on the way that the war memorial in Cambridge has completely lost its significance for the current generation of undergraduates, who do not even notice its presence in the middle of one of the major roads in the city.

barbarian being trampled.¹⁸ A hundred years ago the Italian scholar Ettore Pais suggested that many of the legends of early Rome recorded in Latin literature had been generated in this way in the mid-Republic, when the Romans had forgotten who the ancient statues that stood in the midst of their city were supposed to represent, and came up with new stories to explain them.¹⁹ He suggests, for instance, that Mucius' story was generated by need to explain the existence of a statue of a man holding out his hand towards an altar fire: 'They questioned the statues, so to speak, and the interpretation of them suggested to their imagination facts and circumstances that were later retained as true. The legend of Mucius Scaevola draws its origins from a monument' (Pais 1906: 161).²⁰ Similarly a statue of a female goddess mounted on a horse might have perplexed the Romans, who came up with the story of the brave Cloelia, escaping over the Tiber on horseback, to account for the oddity of what looked to them like a female equestrian statue.²¹ An expensive, imposing statue in the middle of a city is clearly standing as a monument to something; if the original meaning of the monument is lost, a community is obliged to find some new way to make sense of it.²² Often a monument in this situation will attract a variety of stories and interpretative keys co-existing in competition with one another, and the monument's cultural status will stem partly from the community's awareness that it can be explained in a variety of different

¹⁸ This story in itself does not of course constitute a site of memory, since it is just a simple narrative in a text and we have no further evidence that it gained traction in cultural memory and became mandatory cultural knowledge.

¹⁹ See Pais 1906, especially 161.

²⁰ A relief sculpture dated to the second century CE, found at Dunapentele in Pannonia and now in the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest, has been identified as depicting Mucius with his hand in the altar fire; as far as I know this is the only visual representation of the episode that survives from antiquity. However, Günther Schörner has recently suggested to me that the relief looks like a common type depicting ritual sacrifice, and the identification with Mucius may be mistaken; if so, this may be an example of precisely the kind of misinterpretation that Pais posits for antiquity.

²¹ Pliny the Elder (*NH* 34.28) in his indignation makes it clear just how unusual this visual combination was, at least in the early first century CE. Cf. Pais 1906: 156–157 for the theory that the legend of Cloelia (or Valeria) may have been connected with an equestrian statue of a goddess whose identity had been forgotten.

²² Pais 1906: 161. Cf. Spencer 2011 for this idea that stories start when the memory has receded (a phrase borrowed from Livingstone 2011), as a way of making sense of monuments, which she develops in relation to the antiquarian Varro. In other words, in terms of my discussion earlier, cultural memory starts to generate new ideas once the communicative memory that is based in the memory of individuals who experienced the original event has faded with the death of those individuals. This model provides us with a satisfying 'narrative' about the way that exempla are generated, by showing that such tales are new and productive creations that serve the present and try to make sense of the traces of the past. Cf. Kinney 2002: 385 on this phenomenon in relation to the statue of Marcus Aurelius.

ways. This seems to have been the case with the Marcus Aurelius statue during the middle ages.

When an eleventh-century viewer in Rome looks up at our statue of Marcus Aurelius and ‘remembers’ Constantine (or remembers the brave and cunning squire who rescued Rome from siege, if this was an explanation that was taken seriously), exactly the same process of remembering is taking place as when we look at it today and remember Marcus; it is the same regardless of whether we now see the monument’s earlier connection to the past as real or as fabricated.²³ ‘Remembering’, in this context of cultural memory, is an activity in the present that involves participating in one’s own contemporary culture, as it positions itself in relation to the past, engaging with an available memory site. As Erll and Rigney write: ‘As the word itself suggests, “remembering” is better seen as an active engagement with the past, as performative rather than as reproductive. It is as much a matter of acting out a relationship to the past from a particular point in the present as it is a matter of preserving and retrieving earlier stories.’²⁴

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In the case of this statue, temporarily stripped of its association with Marcus Aurelius some time before the tenth century, we will almost certainly never know precisely what factors brought about such rupture in cultural memory. The same is the case for most of the Roman exempla that we study, although the [following chapter](#) we will consider some of the possible reasons for changes in the sites of exemplarity surrounding Mucius and the slave of Tagus who was tortured to death. However, further examination of the case of Robin Hood can help us to understand better the mechanisms and the implications of forgetting and memory rupture, which emerge as such important features of cultural memory, and this will help us to appreciate the dynamics of cultural memory through which Roman exempla were transmitted.²⁵ For although the Robin Hood legend may have a gentler trajectory through the centuries, yet it too experiences radical change over time, in which discarding and innovation play a key

²³ Indeed, as Kinney points out, our current ‘correct’ identification of the statue of Marcus Aurelius ‘does not automatically give access to connoted signified, much less to their associated “euphoric values”’ (Kinney 2002: 393, citing here Roland Barthes, ‘Rhetoric of the Image’ in *Image, Music, Text*: 34–35).

²⁴ Erll and Rigney 2009: 2. These scholars are concerned with the remembering of historical events, and they do not go as far as I go here in suggesting that the process still counts as ‘remembering’ even when there is no real historical event to which it is referring; there may be no real connection to the past at all.

²⁵ Cf. Frow 1997 [chapter 4](#) for the importance of forgetting and discarding data in both oral and literary contexts; A. Assman 2008: 98 on ‘preservative forgetting’ or *Verwahrungsvergessen*.

role. Once one appreciates the roles of forgetting and innovation in that tradition, and the ‘presentness’ of cultural memory, it is clear that a linear and residue-based understanding of cultural memory – whereby memory of an original event is preserved and handed down from generation to generation – is wholly inadequate. This in turn has important implications for our understanding of Roman culture and of the creation and role of exemplary stories within it, and especially on our ability to reconstruct what those stories might have looked like in the periods for which we possess very few – if any – written texts, such as the mid-Republic, by projecting backwards from subsequent literature, as I shall go on to argue in [Chapter 11](#). The Romans have their own story about the continuous tradition through which their ancestral exempla are transmitted – involving, as Matthew Roller has discussed, the initial recognition and subsequent commemoration of heroic and patriotic acts by the community. But it is important to bear in mind that this story is a strategic fabrication, and not an actual account of how exempla are generated and transmitted. Recognising this gives us clearer eyes with which to view and understand the dynamic remembering of Roman exempla too.²⁶

In the case of our familiar Robin Hood, there has indeed been a continuous tradition of one kind or another dating back as far as the twelfth century until the present day, but, as in the case of the statue of Marcus Aurelius, the twists and turns, ruptures and innovations, diversions and diversities of the tradition undermine any claim that what we now know about Robin Hood represents in any way the “preservation” of a historical original down through the years. Indeed, in his medieval incarnation Robin was an ahistorical figure from the French ballad tradition, and was not endowed with historical associations until the fifteenth century. An examination of the story of the memory site of Robin Hood also challenges the idea that we can see the development of a memory site as a linear progression, originating fresh and clear from the original event and then tarnishing and growing more obscure over the years. Rather what we see is a site of memory constantly remodeled and re-appropriated over the centuries, made newly fresh at different stages of its history, sometimes

²⁶ For the conventional ancient version of how exempla are generated and transmitted, see Roller 2004. The four-step sequence entails: 1) performance of an act before the eyes of the community, 2) moral evaluation of that act by the community as ‘primary audience’, 3) commemoration of the act in some form, 4) encounter with the monument by a ‘secondary audience’ at a temporal remove (Roller 2004: 1–7, 2015: 130–131). Note that this narrative supposes the ‘unbroken chain’ of communal memory, and I see it as the strategic representation of the process of exemplary memory rather than a representation of what actually happened.

precisely through discarding older elements.²⁷ In the discussion that follows, I will argue that our modern day traditional and medieval Robin Hood is an illusion, but a necessary and productive one, through which we can forge our belief that tradition provides us with a connection to the past, belief in what I call the ‘unbroken chain’, which is fundamental for cultural cohesion and identity.

In the [previous chapter](#), discussing consensus and the site’s centre of gravity, I wrote of ‘our’ shared modern version of Robin Hood, around which there is general convergence of opinion: the archer Robin Hood is a noble outlaw, living in Sherwood forest on the edge of civilised society, pitted against the evil Sheriff of Nottingham, robbing from the rich to give to poor, supporting the Saxon people against the Norman rulers. However, these key details that are so central to our ‘knowledge’ of Robin Hood today do not actually come to us preserved in a tradition that has been continuous since the medieval era. In fact, they are all aspects of the legend which have become attached to the figure of Robin Hood at particular historical moments and in order to serve particular cultural needs of those historical moments. In his study of the site of memory of Robin Hood, Stephen Knight demonstrates that this ‘modern memory has no resemblance to the figure of Robin Hood who is first recorded in the fifteenth century. All those memorial details have been picked up along the way, and they all have some significance related to the concerns of a period, a context, and the authors who realise those interests.’²⁸ Tracing the evolution of this memory site, Knight shows us how over and again new elements can eventually become accepted as central defining features of the narrative or figure once they have been successfully integrated into the memory site. So in his twelfth-century incarnation in the French ballad tradition, Robin was not conceived of as a historical figure at all, and he had no connection with the specific location of Nottingham. Originally Robin, paramour of Marian, existed in the universal present of a folk-tale, rather than in the specific historical setting of the Crusades.²⁹ The association with Sherwood Forest came about only in the fifteenth century when the tale was reworked as a local story in that area in

²⁷ For details of the evolving Robin Hood legend in the following argument, I draw on Knight (2006); see also <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/robin-hood/text/chandler-robin-hood-development-of-a-popular-hero#preface> (accessed December 2016) for another overview of the tradition.

²⁸ Knight 2006: 149.

²⁹ Knight 2006: 151–152 on traces of a tradition surrounding such a figure in popular culture of south and west England in the medieval period.

relation to local issues about outlaw gangs.³⁰ During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the story underwent ‘gentrification’, and Robin became representative of the Tudor nobility’s adherence to the ideal of loyalty to a good monarch. This is the point in the tradition at which Robin Hood became Robin, Earl of Loxley, and this promotion to the nobility also introduced a new interest in his death and memorialisation.³¹ In the seventeenth century, an alternative parallel tradition, that of the yeoman outlaw, also flourished in a different social milieu. Subsequently, in the nineteenth century this idea of the benevolent noble helping the poor chimed in particularly well with ideals of aristocratic philanthropy, and became a newly central feature.

Knight’s study of the vicissitudes of the Robin Hood story over the centuries effectively dismantles the comfortable idea of the linear evolution of a legend with its roots in the far distant moment of origin. Our twenty-first-century shared version of the legend of Robin Hood carefully and *purposefully* (this is important)³² constructs the effect of reaching back into the medieval past, but this historical effect is illusory. When we moderns think that we are cautiously and critically receiving a national legend that has evolved over the years, and that may have accrued fictional embellishments along the way, we believe we are participating in a long historical tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages. Yet we are actually participating in a very different practice, and a much more recent one: one of strategic ‘remembering’ in the present of the memory site, which constructs its own traditional feel. Knight’s analysis of the Robin Hood story challenges a simplistic narrative about the genuine medieval origins of the story and the idea that what we have now preserves traces either of an original historical event, or even of an original medieval story, and can be cleanly traced right back to the middle ages. In fact, those recent centuries between the fifteenth century and the present day are shown to have been full of forgetting and the over-writing of obsolete motifs with new ones that then gain real traction in a particular social or historical setting. Many of these newly minted motifs can end up being accepted as a central defining feature of the memory site. For instance, in the case of Robin Hood, most people nowadays would associate him very strongly with the idea of stealing from the rich to give to the poor – this is the sense behind

³⁰ Knight 2006: 154. ³¹ Knight 2006: 153–154.

³² By using the term ‘purposefully’, I don’t mean to suggest that individuals engaging with the memory site are necessarily consciously reshaping or adding to it, although this may happen, too, but rather that the new shape of the site has its own utility in the present in which it is brought to be; change has cultural purpose.

the use of the phrase 'Robin Hood tax' for instance. And yet this was a feature of the story that was introduced as late as 1822 by the novella *Maid Marian* by Thomas Love Peacock, as part of a liberal satire on Tory uses of the past.³³ However, I have found myself that even once one is aware at the intellectual level of this recent and specific origin of the motif, it is difficult, as a member of a twenty-first century British culture, to accept at the level of cultural memory that this would not have been a feature of Robin Hood legend in previous centuries. My rational understanding of the memory site's recent history is not enough to quash my attachment to the story's traditional status.

Covering the tracks and erasing the signs of innovation in this way creates the effect of an unbroken chain of memory, reaching back to the originary moment of the exemplum, when the deed was first recognised and prized as exemplary and entered the commemorative tradition. However, this effect of an unbroken chain of memory is an illusion, as we have seen in the case of Robin Hood, albeit a purposeful illusion. Claims of the unbroken chain of cultural memory are important for establishing the authority of the story. In our everyday lives, we tend to handle the legend of Robin Hood as if it *were* the product of an unbroken chain and as if therefore one might be able to uncover an Ur-story by removing the accretions it has gathered over the centuries; indeed, there are scholars who take this view. In his article, Knight is understandably scathing about such positivistic attempts to get at the 'real' medieval Robin Hood in Nottingham, through the tradition that we have inherited (that is to say, the memory site that has been constituted and with which we currently engage) in the twenty-first century, and his own research argues compellingly that such an enterprise would be futile.³⁴ However, we can sympathise with this urge to find the real Robin, for the desire for authentic connections with the past is a very important cultural impetus, which cuts across desire for scholarly scepticism. Just as newcomers to a culture, including children and new allies or new citizens, are made to feel that they must acquire this cultural knowledge in order to be properly acculturated, so the idea of a tradition handed-down through the

³³ Peacock also first promulgated the idea that Lord Robin robbed from the rich to give to the poor, so familiar a feature now. Medieval Robin the rough social bandit kept his takings for himself and his friends; the distressed lord sought only to get his own property back. It is a vivid marker of the modern noble lord that he distributes charity, a process which may briefly improve the lot of the few of the poor but even more clearly marks the superiority of the charitable in both morality and power' (Knight 2006: 156–157).

³⁴ Knight 2006.

generations creates a similar sense of cultural belonging over time. By receiving this cultural tradition, and familiarising ourselves with a memory site, we feel that we are perpetuating our long-established culture, incorporating ourselves into a historical lineage.

When new motifs are introduced into a site of memory, then, it is vital for their reception that they give the impression of dating from the origination of the myth or from the original historical event; they must seem to be authentically traditional. I may now be aware that the medieval flavour of the Robin Hood I know was invented in the nineteenth century, but its 'medievalness' and the Greenwood remain important to me, perhaps unshakeably, as a member of twenty-first century English culture. That is what makes memory sites like these so appealing – they feel as if they reach back into another era and sustain a connection between past and present. We saw the same authenticity effect at work in the medieval aetiological legend that was invented to explain Marcus Aurelius' statue. The legend has a Republican feel to it, claiming to be set 'in the time of the senators and the consuls', and it re-uses familiar motifs from Roman history and Roman exempla, including those from the Mucius legend of the siege by a foreign king from which a single brave man is able to free the city. Familiar motifs that speak to our own experience and understanding of the world, and to our preconceptions about the past, make an account feel more authentic to us. The phenomenon of premediation is at work here, whereby cultural memory is constantly reusing familiar elements from elsewhere, which are important for establishing the traditional authenticity of a narrative and its roots in a particular past.³⁵ Roman exempla, too, are designed to communicate a connection with the past: as we have seen, their specific historical settings and their purported historical reality are important aspects of their cultural and ethical status.³⁶

Importantly, one of the very aims of such a memory site (whether of Robin Hood, or Mucius, or, more pressingly in a modern context of recent traumatic historical events such as the Holocaust, the Indian Mutiny or the First World War) is to communicate a sense of itself precisely *as* an unbroken chain of memory, passed on through the generations, replicating

³⁵ Taylor 2003 discusses such 'familiar elements' as 'cultural scenarios'. We might think in recent history of the way that cinema draws on the familiar visualisation of ancient Rome in nineteenth century painting when it comes to developing its visual language and conceptualisation of the ancient world; it is these recent remediations which feel most authentic and immediate and which then 'premeditate' attempts to find authenticity in cinematic representation today (Wyke 1997 discusses this phenomenon, though without using this terminology of course).

³⁶ Cf. Chapter 1 on the 'realness' and historicity of exempla.

the memory which stems from an originary moment. Knight's analysis of Robin Hood is salutary in that it makes the case very compellingly that this is an illusion; in fact, elements of the myth are constantly being forgotten and discarded as they no longer serve the needs of the present, while new motifs join and new formulations of the story or the character or legend make new sense of it and revitalise it for another generation or another era. The way that Roman texts represent the *exempla* system should not blind us modern scholars to the fact that 'tradition' can never really be an unbroken chain, and that rupture and forgetting are an important means of keeping sites of memory alive and monuments from the archive relevant and meaningful.³⁷ However, we must also appreciate that this illusion of the unbroken chain of memory, while only an illusion, is a vital and sustaining one. So remembering is both a dynamic process and one within which stability, or at least the illusion of stability, is an important aspect. In her exploration of the way that performance traditions in Mexico incorporate both stability and change, Diana Taylor conveys this beautifully: 'Dances change over time, even though generations of dancers swear they're always the same.'³⁸

Although a site of exemplarity or a site of memory is usually presented within a culture as if memory was something precious from the past that is being carefully preserved and handed down intact to the next generation – so as to keep that chain of memory unbroken – in fact, memory sites require constant renovation to keep them culturally relevant, just as, in ancient Rome, Romulus' hut was kept in pristine condition through regular renovations.³⁹ When it comes to narratives about the past, what is it that drives the constant amendments and refurbishments to a site of exemplarity over the years? Why not simply replicate cultural memory precisely? One answer may relate to human nature and individuality; it is

³⁷ Neither the account of Roman cultural memory in Hölkeskamp 1996 nor the description of the process by which *exempla* are generated in Roman society in Roller 2004 takes enough account of the importance of forgetting and rupture in Roman cultural memory; Roller's account buys too completely into the Roman rhetoric of linear development, despite acknowledging that this is a Roman representation, and Hölkeskamp presents memory sites as constantly accruing new memories in addition to the ones in existence, but doesn't allow for the discarding of meaning along the way, so that his version of Roman memory simply increases in detail and complexity over time; cf. Hölkeskamp 2006: 487: 'Rome's urban landscape of memory thus acquired more and more texture, plurality, and, with the emergence of new media, polysemy.'

³⁸ Taylor 2003: 20, contrasting the performative 'repertoire' with the more static 'archive', where the signifier remains the same over time. Also 'the rift, I submit, does not lie between the written and the spoken word, but between the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e. spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)' (Taylor 2003: 19).

³⁹ Edwards 1996: 33–40.

simply not possible for one person to replicate another exactly, or to retell a story precisely as they have heard it. Each individual may believe that they are indeed replicating what has come before, but through tiny, incremental changes, invisible at the moment of replication, the whole tradition evolves over time, as in the case of Taylor's Mexican dancers, who believe they are preserving a tradition, but transform it slightly in the very act of preserving it.⁴⁰ To elucidate this process of 'linear transmission' in folk-tales and fairy-tales, Angela Carter uses the analogy of culinary traditions, such as a family recipe for potato soup carefully passed down through generations, but never made the same way twice. At the same time her culinary analogy expresses the 'popular and common' nature of such stories discussed in the [previous chapter](#); she writes: 'Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think in terms of the domestic arts. "This is how *I* make potato soup."' ⁴¹ Carter's analogy resonates with Roman exempla in showing how a recipe or story can be a 'common' possession in both senses, as discussed earlier: it is shared by members of a community, but, in addition, individuals feel comfortable taking possession of it and reshaping it for domestic purposes. Inevitably, over a long period, broader external changes, too, will affect the drift of the tradition, so that change is by no means subject only to individual idiosyncrasy. For instance, over the centuries the availability or quality of certain ingredients, changing cultural attitudes towards food and cooking, and other cultural influences, will affect the way that the recipe for potato soup changes, so that it reflects broader cultural trends.

Such an incremental progression, which also reflects wider cultural changes, is at work in the evolution of Roman sites of exemplarity, as we shall see in the following chapters. However, in the case of exempla there is also a stronger impetus in operation: the force generated by *internal inconsistency*, and the consequent continual drive for truth and resolution that propels constant reworkings of sites of memory. This is related to the quality of historicity that exempla possess, so that even those that are most 'legendary' in character, and least firmly rooted in knowable history, such as the story of Mucius, are nevertheless tied to particular historical periods, and represented as really having happened. We have already touched on the significance of this historicity for their ethical power; here we will consider how it also influences the dynamics of the developing tradition. Whereas overtly fictional forms such as fairy-tales or jokes are free to develop in a forward direction towards their relevance for the

⁴⁰ For the Mexican dancers, see Taylor: 2003: 20.

⁴¹ Carter 2005: xii.

present day,⁴² a memory site or a site of exemplarity is always also burrowing backwards towards the truth of a supposed past. The exemplum has a built-in tension, between the need for present relevance and the need for respect for the past. This is the same for all historical material, but the exemplum embodies this tension in an especially emphatic way. This foot in the past means that odd details in a narrative are likely to be respected and preserved rather than entirely smoothed away, and that there is felt to be a 'truth' to be found behind the story.

This built-in tension means that at any given moment a site of exemplarity is likely to present elements that seem troubling because, having emerged in an earlier cultural context, they no longer make sense. However, they cannot simply be swept away and replaced by more current motifs (as happens, for instance, in the case of the modern urban myth⁴³) because they are viewed as historical, and their very oddness lends a sense of authenticity and past-ness. Such elements in a site of memory, then, are the narrative equivalent of the odd details on the statue of Marcus Aurelius that seemed to the medieval writer to need special explanation: the little bird between the ears, the lack of saddle and the small size of the barbarian. When it comes to ancient sites of exemplarity, users of exempla are pulled in two directions: the story must retain generalisable moral meaning, but it must also be 'true' to history. Due to this double commitment, 'meaningful' historical stories which seem to speak to universal truths, such as Roman exempla, often contain this kind of 'grit' and irritant as residue of their previous lives in earlier cultural settings, and so require a high level of maintenance to address these anomalies and keep them functioning.⁴⁴

Furthermore, Laura Basu has recently argued (in relation to the contested tradition surrounding the figure of the Australian outlaw Ned Kelly) that it is precisely this kind of inconsistency that keeps memory sites alive.⁴⁵ The internal ambiguity of a site of memory, combined with the sense of its realness and historical grounding, provokes the desire to solve its problems

⁴² There the fictional character and 'other world' setting of the stories allow for appropriation without anxiety about truth, even while their cultural authenticity as traditional artefacts that have been handed down through the generations remains very important.

⁴³ See Brunwand 1983 with note 32 in the previous chapter.

⁴⁴ Sites of exemplarity share the qualities of both 'realness' and 'sharedness' with the memory sites studied by recent scholars of cultural memory, making this scholarship particularly relevant to my discussion here.

⁴⁵ Her discussion focuses on the contested tradition surrounding the figure of the Australian outlaw Ned Kelly; see Basu 2009, Basu 2012. See also Rigney 2012, chapter 3 on the 'ambivalence' in memory sites that helps to keep them 'procreative'.

and pin down once and for all the true account of who Ned Kelly was and what he did. As Basu describes it: 'The case is thought of as a highly controversial, factually ambiguous and emotionally fraught one.'⁴⁶ She argues that each new version (remediation) of Ned Kelly's story, whether historical scholarship, newspaper report or popular film, aims to make the best sense of the available material from which the site is made up, and in so doing incorporates rival versions within it: 'each bid for veracity also always entails the incorporation of other texts, either in an appropriation of these qualities in the other, or to undermine the other in support of its own.'⁴⁷ This idea of internal ambiguity may be similar to what Ellen O'Gorman is expressing when she describes the exemplum of M. Atilius Regulus as 'haunting', in an interesting footnote to a discussion of how the Roman mode of exemplary thinking might intersect with cultural memory and with history: '... exemplarity, as a form of historical thought', she writes, 'works as a cultural memory process and *at the same time* as a mode of pragmatic deliberation. Regulus in particular, moreover, does not belong to a forgotten past, but is remembered, represented and "exemplarised" to excess. Indeed the very excess of remembrance in this instance, as well as the considerable ambiguities around the question of what Regulus is supposed to exemplify, may represent a different kind of haunting. Whereas for Freud trauma escapes the memory process, the exemplum of Regulus appears within, but not fully comprehended by the memory system itself. Hence its continual reworking testifies to the difficulty with its assimilation.'⁴⁸ For O'Gorman, this awkwardness and 'continual reworking' are peculiarities of the Regulus exemplum, associated with its particular ambiguity of meaning. I would like to suggest here, however, that it is a feature of Roman sites of exemplarity more generally that they are not able to be 'fully comprehended' by the memory system, because they are inherently indeterminate and irresolvable in a most 'procreative' way, as Ann Rigney would put it. So it is precisely the lack of resolution in such cases that makes for an appealing and enduring memory site; scholars, journalists, and ordinary folk are constantly searching for the truth of these stories, whether at the level of historical fact or of the human condition. Within scholarship, each person who takes a crack at the subject incorporates and reworks the previous work of scholars. People need to keep worrying away at a memory site, providing new accounts that makes sense of its elements, and of (certain, prominent) previous versions. Importantly, as Basu puts it: "[T]ruth" and "myth" are therefore both part of the same

⁴⁶ Basu 2009: 142.

⁴⁷ Basu 2009: 145.

⁴⁸ O'Gorman 2011: 277, n. 41.

medial processes, and paradoxically, the media work *together* to produce a *contested* site of memory.⁴⁹

This theoretical framework of the site of exemplarity can contribute to a better understanding of how Roman exempla function within a tradition and of their more puzzling aspects. It helps to explain, for one thing, the combination of consensus and indeterminacy that we find in relation to exempla. Sites of exemplarity seem stable and durable, and this underpins the authority and cultural status that enable them to function in binding a community together across the generations and over time. However, they are also subject to change of all kinds: reinterpretation, reinvention, refurbishment and redeployment. Exempla are continually adapted to new contexts in Roman culture, while preserving the sense that they are being scrupulously preserved through the ages. As we have seen, this relates to the balance between stability and change that is a feature of the dynamics of cultural memory and ‘tradition’ more broadly, as elaborated in recent scholarship on cultural memory and modern media. The insights of such scholarship can be productively applied to a study of the dynamics of Roman exempla as a cultural practice that mobilises the idea of ‘tradition’ and shared cultural memory, yet is also constantly changing and adapting and allowing for new interpretations.

Roman sites of exemplarity are not only subject to continuous reworking over time but are also heterogeneous and indeterminate at any given moment. The simultaneous availability of different versions of an exemplary narrative is precisely what constitutes the site of exemplarity; it also helps to keep that site open, in the sense both that it throws up inconsistencies that seem to invite amendment and also that its inclusion of variants seems to authorise further variation and amendment (as with the Ned Kelly site). In the chapters that follow, the object of my study will often be the whole site of exemplarity as a productively heterogeneous and constantly developing whole, and it should become increasingly clear how important this model of the simultaneously and serially multivalent site of exemplarity is. As we shall see, these sites form the backdrop, the horizon and the field of reference against which our extant works of ancient literature are composed and with which they engage. Ancient literary works or passages within them that refer to exempla are ‘remediations’ of

⁴⁹ Basu 2009: 153. As she puts it earlier: ‘Contestation appears to be an important element in the maintenance of the memory site, arising out of a preoccupation with veracity, but stimulating the production of myth. The myth-making effects can be seen almost as a by-product of the struggle for veracity, whereby the creation of myth is an effect of the “internal proliferation of meaning”’ (Basu 2009: 150). Cf. Wertheim 2009: 167 on a similar contestation around the figure of Anne Frank.

these sites of exemplarity and contribute to their constitution.⁵⁰ Viewing them as a cultural phenomenon within this wider framework of exemplary ethics and sites of exemplarity helps us to understand those works of literature and the world in which they were written. In particular, the idea that the variety of media representing a site of memory work together to produce a contested site of memory provides the methodological underpinning for my own strategy of reading the ‘story-tradition’ surrounding an exemplum (the site of exemplarity) as a whole and viewing it as controversial and complex *as a whole*. [Chapter 12](#) will draw on this model to argue that it is the complex and contested characteristics of the site of exemplarity that keep it alive and ever-changing, but further that this ‘controversiality’ is also of paramount importance in understanding its place in Roman exemplary ethics. The [following chapter](#), however, offers close analysis of two particular sites of exemplarity from ancient Rome to further pursue the questions of how and why sites of exemplarity change over time.

⁵⁰ As even the briefest references to a site of exemplarity are (and do); a brief reference is by no means always a simplistic engagement with a site.

Changing Sites of Exemplarity: Two Case Studies

Sites of exemplarity, then, are not fixed reference points for literary allusions, but are shifting fields of reference. This chapter traces the way that two particular individual Roman sites of exemplarity (Mucius and the smiling slave) changed over time. Through these case studies, it investigates the mechanisms by which changes to sites take place in ancient Rome. These include particular interventions in cultural memory, such as new versions of stories in influential works of literature, or appropriation of legendary heroes by leading Roman families. However, it also considers more organic processes of changes such as bricolage and the recycling of motifs from other stories. The chapter also uses these two case studies to further explore some of the reasons why sites of exemplarity develop new content or emphases. We have seen some broad suggestions in previous chapters about the factors that might influence the way that sites of memory and exemplarity change over time, for instance the need to reinforce important cultural scenarios and to adapt them to fit with newly emerging ideological priorities. In ancient Rome we can trace broad changes in sites of exemplarity that reflect the social changes of the first century, such as a move away from the archetypal emphasis on patriotism and self-sacrifice that we saw in [Chapter 1](#) towards an emphasis on personal loyalty, domestic virtue and virtue that has its own integrity and needs no official recognition. We see emerging themes such as those of resistance to power, and move towards greater social inclusivity in exemplary ethics that allow for new kinds of exemplary heroes including slaves and women.¹

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For Cicero, the story of Mucius is primarily the story of a man who volunteers to infiltrate the enemy camp and tries to kill the enemy leader

¹ As we saw in [Chapter 5](#).

Porsenna. Cicero cites Mucius as a patriotic hero prepared to face certain death for the good of the community, paralleling him with the self-sacrificing Decii, and his focus is on the part of the story that for later writers becomes only the prelude to the main story of the feat of the burning hand. This story of the attempted assassination that for Cicero constituted the legend of Mucius is likely to have grown out of a reworking of existing folk-tale and cultural memory motifs, very possibly representing a dialogue between Athenian and Roman culture through the portable currency of the 'tellable tale', which can easily transcend cultural boundaries.² The name Cordus, which is associated with Mucius in several sources, may betray a connection with the Athenian foundation myth of King Codrus, which is mentioned in Plato's *Symposium* and by Lycurgus in his *Fourth Oration against Leocrates* (84–87), suggesting that it was well-known in Classical Athens.³ This Athenian foundation myth has striking parallels with the first part of Mucius' story both in narrative content and in ethical significance. During a siege of Athens by the Dorians in the eleventh century BCE, the Delphic oracle pronounced that Athens would only be saved if its king was killed at the hands of the enemy; disguised as a beggar, therefore, King Codrus slipped out of the besieged city, infiltrated the enemy's camp, and attacked and killed one of the enemy in order to provoke the Dorians into killing him in retaliation, so that they might inadvertently fulfil the oracle's requirements for Athenian victory. It is a tale of patriotism and self-sacrifice that, like Mucius' tale, also lays on the table pressing questions about the extent to which military deception and cunning are ethically acceptable in times of conflict and desperation.⁴

The evidence of a coin struck in 70 BCE also suggests that at this point in the first century Mucius was known as 'Cordus' rather than 'Scaevola'.⁵ It is likely that there were several different *cognomina* for Mucius in circulation at this time; Plutarch mentions another variant that appears in a Greek work of the Augustan age, 'Opsigonos'.⁶ However, the specific

² See the previous discussion for the concept. This process of reusing already familiar tropes is called 'premediation' by scholars of cultural memory, see Erll 2009.

³ Plat. *Symp.* 208d4–6. See Schlering *RE* XI 984–994 for a list of ancient sources. In his discussion of Athenian social memory, Steinbock 2011 suggests that Codrus may have been an exemplary hero for Athenian ephebes.

⁴ A detailed account of the story is found at Lyc. *Leoc.* 84–87. For a discussion of the tradition and its ethical implications, see Hesk 2000: 89–102 on 'Tricky Codrus'.

⁵ Dionysius of Halicarnassus calls him Mucius Cordus (Dion. Hal. 5.25) and many later authors follow this variant while also combining it with the detail of the burning hand (Zonaras 7.12, Ampelius 20.3 and anonymous *de vir. illustr.* 3.12.1).

⁶ Plut. *Pop.* 17: 'While almost all writers agree in calling Mucius "Scaevola", Athenodorus son of Sandon says in his work addressed to Augustus' sister Octavia that he is called "Opsigonos".'

details of this coin support the idea that in fact Scaevola was not in this period one of those names. For the coin seems to have been struck by a man called Mucius Scaevola (probably the P. Mucius Scaevola who was pontifex in 69 BCE) and to show him arrogating to himself the cognomen 'Cordus'. That is to say, he is trying to associate himself with the legend of the hero then known as Mucius Cordus, and to posit the legendary hero as an early ancestor of the Mucia clan.⁷ If 'Mucius Scaevola' had already been an accepted name for this hero, then there would be no need to add the name 'Cordus' to the coin in order to make the association.

Meanwhile Cicero, in his multiple references to Mucius over the course of his literary career from the 80s BCE until his death in 43, does not call Mucius 'Scaevola' and he never mentions the burning hand.⁸ This absence of the central burning hand motif is also true of the only other reference to Mucius that we have dating from earlier than Livy's work, which is a very short fragment from the second-century annalist L. Cassius Hemina in Book 2 of his histories: 'He decided to kill the king Porsenna' (*censuit sese regem Porsennam occidere*).⁹ This is thin evidence, but there are grounds for arguing that the second part of the story with the self-mutilation and the associated cognomen of Scaevola were not yet the common currency that they become after Livy's account. First, the absence of the cognomen Scaevola in Cicero's works is notable, especially given that he knew the contemporary family of Mucii Scaevolae very well, and the coin struck in 70 BCE by a member of this family seems to provide evidence that at that date the legendary hero was not yet identified as a member of this particular strand of the Mucii. The Mucii Scaevolae were well-known from as early as the third century BCE as a family of outstanding lawyers; Cicero himself studied law under the pontifex Q. Mucius Scaevola, and mentions the family often in his writings.¹⁰ Yet he omits mention both of the name Scaevola and of the part of the story where Mucius burns his hand, referring only to the siege and the attempted assassination of Porsenna.

Athenodorus of Sandon was a Stoic philosopher from Tarsus and one of Augustus' teachers; cf. Hemelrijk 1999: 106 for a mention of this passage in the context of the dedication of Athenodorus' work to Octavia.

⁷ For coin and discussion, see Crawford 1974: 413.

⁸ As we have already seen, from his speech *Pro Sestio* (Cic. *Sest.* 48) in 56 BCE to the *Paradoxa Stoicorum* (*Parad.* 1.11) in 46.

⁹ F20 in Cornell 2013 = Peter 1906 F 16. In the absence of any further surrounding text in the latter case, it is impossible to say whether this would-be assassin of Porsenna was even identified as Mucius in this work, let alone whether the story contained a reference to the hand. Nevertheless, it does suggest the existence of the tradition in some recognisable form in the mid-second century BCE.

¹⁰ On the family, see Bauman 1983.

However, as we have seen, by the middle of the first century CE the mere mention of flame or fire was enough to conjure up Mucius' story. The burning hand is the iconic motif of the narrative. It is clear from Martial's epigrams that in Flavian Rome of the 80s CE a whole Colosseum full of spectators can recognise Mucius' story from the sight of a poor slave burning off his hand in the arena.¹¹ His cognomen 'Scaevola' or 'Left-handed' is also explicitly associated with this central episode of the story; many authors explain that he won this cognomen because of the sacrifice of his right hand and that it has been passed down by the family ever since. The final line of Livy's account is: 'who was afterwards endowed with the cognomen Scaevola because of the destruction of his right hand' (*cui postea Scaevolae a clade dextrae manus cognomen inditum*, 2.13.1).¹² The Lewis and Short Latin dictionary repeats this pleasing story of the unbroken chain of Roman tradition; the entry *ad loc.* explains the origin of name Scaevola and then states: 'after his time, a frequent surname in the gens Mucia'.

Discussing our coin of 70 BCE, Michael Crawford has suggested that the cognomen Cordus may have been 'foisted' later on the Mucius legend.¹³ It is perhaps even more likely that Mucius' story was based initially on the Codrus/Cordus legend and then later developed an association with the Scaevolae in late Republic, which was then woven into the specifics of the tale with a newly emerging detail of a burning hand, which caught the imagination of the first century. By Seneca's day the extraordinary endurance of the burning hand, not even mentioned by Cicero, has come to be the dominant feature of the tale, even to have the same clichéd feel about it as 'robbing from the rich to give to the poor'.¹⁴ This may be, then, an excellent example of successful integration of a motif that gains real cultural traction and entirely covers its tracks. We might tentatively construct a hypothesis whereby a Mucius Scaevola begins to publicly associate his family with the legend of Mucius Cordus in the 70s BCE, and in subsequent years the family's cognomen 'Scaevola' bleeds into the Cordus tale, giving rise to a new story about the destruction of the hero's right hand, designed to explain the cognomen and endorse the connection. The association between the Scaevola family and the republican hero commemorated in the coin (and perhaps even first promoted in this coin) may have provided the background to the etymological link made

¹¹ Martial *Ep.* 10.25; see discussion in [Chapter 7](#).

¹² Cf. 'Mucius stretched out his left hand and took it (on which account, they say, he received the surname of Scaevola, which means "Left-handed")' Plut. *Pop.* 17. Note that Plutarch also needs to explain to his Greek-speaking audience the meaning of the word 'Scaevola'.

¹³ Crawford 1974: 413. ¹⁴ Cf. Sen. *Ep.* 24.6 on the clichéd feel of exempla.

in Livy between the name and the burning hand story. Livy's association of Mucius' story with the well-known contemporary family of the Mucii Scaevolae is our earliest source to present the burning of the hand in the fire as an aetiological explanation of the family cognomen. If the burning hand element of the story were new at this point, this would have been a neat strategy for embedding the new feature within a long family tradition, since the name 'Mucius Scaevola' itself was very familiar in the late Republic and had a long and illustrious history.

The story of Mucius will have transmuted and developed piecemeal through the process well known to scholars of folk-tales and sometimes called 'bricolage'. Scholars have noted that the removal of the right hand was an early punishment for a broken oath, and the mutilation of the hand may thus reflect the incorporation of an existing and recognised punishment motif into the Mucius story.¹⁵ In the process of bricolage, elements are borrowed from existing story traditions to fill in gaps that emerge when cultural shifts change the interpretative frame and render some aspects of a story unintelligible or troubling or redundant. In her discussion of the evolution of fairy-tales, Marina Warner has used the analogy of a mosaic to describe this process of story development over time, where a mosaic is composed from fragments and tiles from other works of art.¹⁶ However, in historical storytelling, such borrowing of material from other sources and stories does not strip the original story bare, as it would a real material mosaic. Quite the opposite: the repetition of a motif serves to strengthen that motif wherever else it appears.¹⁷ Generally, the more often a narrative element or a scenario is repeated in the historical tradition the more naturalised it becomes, so that it is increasingly recognised not as an account of an isolated event, but as following a pattern, and as being just one more instance of the way that things tend to happen. Members of a culture internalise (as it were) the narrative pattern, so that it becomes part of the way they structure their understanding of the world.¹⁸

Plutarch's explanation of how Mucius managed to infiltrate Porsenna's enemy camp in the first place also appears to reuse motifs from other

¹⁵ See Ogilvie 1965: 262–263, followed by Fitzgerald 2007: 213 and Griffin 2013: 351, both of whom suggest that the Mucius tale was 'originally' one about punishment for perjury; as I have previously suggested, this concept of the original meaning of an exemplary story is fraught with difficulties. See also Mueller on the language of sacrificial devotion in Valerius Maximus' version of the story of Mucius Scaevola at 3.3.1 (Mueller 2002: 126).

¹⁶ In a talk delivered at the London School of Advanced Study, 30th September 2013.

¹⁷ See Kraus 1994 on the repetition of literary and cultural topoi in Livy.

¹⁸ On these cultural 'scenarios' (her term for them) as structuring experience and understanding, see Taylor 2003.

stories. Livy's earlier version had glossed over this aspect of the tale in order to focus on what happens after the failed assassination attempt, and his entire narrative of this part of the story consisted of the following bare statements: 'With a sword hidden in this clothes he set out. When he arrived he stood in a dense crowd near the king's tribunal' (*abdito intra vestem ferro profiscitur. ubi eo venit, in confertissima turba prope regium tribuna constitit*, 2.12.6). Quite understandably intrigued by what might have taken place between the *profiscitur* and the *venit*, Plutarch offers, by way of explanation, the detail that 'he stole into his camp, dressed in Etruscan clothes, and speaking in their language'.¹⁹ This explanatory detail may well be borrowed from (and is at least shared with) the less well-known exemplary story of Fabius Caesio, who in 310 BCE was ordered by his brother Quintus Fabius Maximus to spy on the Etruscans because he spoke the language fluently, and sent out into the Ciminian forest disguised as a peasant; as in the case of the Mucius story, the outcome of this successful infiltration is an alliance for Rome.²⁰ The new detail makes cultural sense because it repeats a familiar scenario.

The twin features of the burning hand and the name Scaevola seem to have come very quickly to a new centrality in the period between Cicero's death in 43 BCE and the publication of Livy's early books (in circa 27–25 BCE) – a period of less than twenty years – after which it was firmly established as iconic. For instance, two texts that have been dated to early to mid-first century, Manilius' *Astronomica* and the pseudo-Virgilian *Culex*, make brief and casual reference to Mucius' suffering by fire.²¹ The concise phrasing with which it is described in both texts (*igne sepulto vulneribus* 'putting out the fire with his wounds' and *ardorem corpore passus* 'having suffered a blaze with his body') suggests that both authors expected their readers to have prior familiarity with the scene. By this stage it is this scene that is the central aspect of Mucius' site of exemplarity, rather than the attempted assassination of Porsenna as in

¹⁹ παρεισηλθεν εἰς τὸ στρατόπεδον, Τυρρηνίδα φορῶν ἐσθῆτα καὶ φωνῇ χρώμενος ὁμοία (Plut. *Pop.* 17).

²⁰ Our only extant source for this story is Frontinus (1.2.2), but it is likely that it existed in the Greek and Latin tradition of *strategemata* (military strategy) with which Plutarch was familiar.

²¹ Manil. *Astron.* 1.779–80: *Scaevola trunco/nobilior* ('Scaevola more noble on account of his mutilation') among the heroes in the Milky Way; 4.30–31: . . . *igne sepulto/vulneribus victor repetisset Mucius urbem*; (would Mucius have sought the city as a victor with the fire put out with his wounds) *Culex*, 365–366: *Mucius et prudens ardorem corpore passus/cui cessit Lydi timefacta potentia regis* ('Mucius wisely suffered the heat with his body, and the terrified power of the king of Lydus succumbed to him'). For the dating of Manilius' *Astronomica* to between 9 and 14 CE, see Volk 2009: 172. On the Milky Way heroes, see Landolfi 1990, Abry 2011: 223–228.

Cicero's works. This represents a swift and radical change in the site of exemplarity that sounds a warning note about our ability to reconstruct what the Mucius story might have looked like in the decades and centuries before Cicero was writing; we cannot assume that the story had remained more or less the same in earlier periods, worn only by gentle attrition over the years. As we have seen in the foregoing discussion of the case of Robin Hood, new motifs and elements of a story can embed themselves swiftly, soon looking as if they had always been there. However, in order to do this, they do need both to look like authentic residues of the past and to be meaningful to consumers of the story. Innovation to an established tradition, then, needs to weave in recognisable, digestible elements that can be easily assimilated and look immediately authentic and convincing as residues of the past.

Perhaps Livy introduced the motif into the tradition himself; certainly it was his influential work that made the burning hand canonical. The case of Robin Hood does give us some licence to argue that a single literary work can be highly influential on the whole site of memory or site of exemplarity, affecting the way members of the culture subsequently think about the site and how they interpret other media where it is represented or referred to.²² This influence is felt even when most members of the culture may not have read the influential text and may have no idea that it has shaped their knowledge of the memory site. Key aspects of our shared knowledge about Robin Hood, as I have discussed, which we acquire as if receiving details of an oral and medial tradition handed down over generations, can actually be traced to specific influential literary works from the nineteenth century, such as those by Thomas Love Peacock and Walter Scott. I myself had not been aware of these nineteenth-century versions of Robin Hood's story before I read Knight's article, and I had certainly not read them. Yet my understanding of Robin Hood was, indirectly, almost entirely shaped by them. The case of Robin Hood demonstrates, then, the power of individual literary sources (and of course other powerful media such as film) to affect the broader cultural memory, even indirectly and even when members of the culture may be unaware of it. This is good news for classicists, with our limited pool of sources and our reliance on extant written material: we can feel justified in using Livy as an influential text whose

²² For the role of influential literature in shaping, disseminating and sustaining cultural memory, see Rigney 2012, especially [chapter 1](#); she describes works of literature as 'portable monuments' that can transfer between cultures and across time as well; cf. Rigney 2008, and the idea of literary texts as 'objects of remembrance' which can provide a bridge between different eras, since they are often read and circulated long after they are composed.

version of the Mucius story is likely to have structured and informed many of the subsequent remediations and interpretations that made up the Mucius site of exemplarity. Nevertheless, both the Robin Hood site of memory and Roman exempla also existed – and were understood to exist – independently of any particular literary text or version (as we saw in [Chapter 8](#)). Acceptance of specific literary mediations is reliant on this independent existence. Any lack of awareness of textual influence is partly attributable to this cherished status as independent, historical, commonly known, and mandatory, and as therefore having an existence outside particular literary works. Like the urban myth, the exemplum and the memory site purposefully reject the concept of specific individual sources; their authority comes precisely from the idea that they are generally known.²³

The social, political and moral changes that took place in Roman culture over this period all contributed to changes in the site of exemplarity, shaping it with the pressures of changing social priorities and ethical needs. The avid uptake of this scene of the burning hand in the first century CE may perhaps be explained by the suggestion that it was felt to speak very powerfully to emerging contemporary first-century issues about personal virtue, resistance to coercion and resilience in the face of hardship. These are features that are increasingly emphasised as the century goes on, in the works of Valerius Maximus, Seneca the Younger and Silius Italicus for instance, all of whom lend the story a philosophical edge, as we shall see. The Mucius story was able to contribute to ethical developments of that period and to the need for new Stoic heroes manifesting personal virtues of endurance and resilience beyond the patriotic. Two particular trends that we can observe in the Mucius site appear to respond to broader social changes. One is his changing social status – from a nobleman in Livy to an illiterate soldier in Seneca. Another is the waning significance of the patriotic framework and the association with external validation, so prominent in Cicero, and the increasing tendency to see Mucius as a Stoic hero, with his virtues valued for their own sake.

The first trend that seems to emerge from the various treatments of this Mucius exempla over the first century is towards a more socially inclusive exemplary ethics. Like Robin Hood, who is in some versions a nobleman

²³ On this as a feature of the exempla in Valerius Maximus, and the implication of the author's lack of citation of his sources, see Welch 2013. Contrast the attitude towards figures who enter common knowledge as 'literary'; I would not want to claim that my knowledge of Odysseus did not come from *The Odyssey*, or of Hamlet from Shakespeare's play, and even if I hadn't read these texts I would consider them the source for my knowledge of these figures and their stories. Cf. Bayard 2007. On the suspicion of particular mediations as *less* authentic, see also Langlands 2018.

and in others lowly born, depending on which group appropriates the story,²⁴ Mucius moves up and down the social scale depending on the text, so that the inspiring elements of his story can serve different socio-rhetorical needs. In Livy's early Augustan account, Mucius is described as a 'young nobleman' (*adulescens nobilis*, Livy 2.12). In 30 CE, Valerius Maximus does not specify his social status, but does associate him with the argument that virtue is equally accessible to everyone no matter their social standing, which appears at the end of the same chapter (3.3, *De patientia*) where Mucius' exemplum is the leading exemplum:

Virtue is not, therefore, fastidious about who approaches her: when strong characters are aroused she allows them to come right up to her, and she provides generous or stingy portions to each person without any discrimination according to status; rather she is available to all equally on the basis of how much desire you bring rather than how much social standing, and on the assessment of your good qualities she hands over to you the weight that is to be borne, so that you can carry away as much as your soul is capable of bearing.

non ergo fastidioso aditu virtus: excitata vivida ingenia ad se penetrare patitur neque haustum sui cum aliquo personarum discrimine largum malignumve praebet, sed omnibus aequaliter exposita quid cupiditatis potius quam quid dignitatis attuleris aestimat inque captu bonorum suorum tibi ipsi pondus examinandum relinquit, ut quantum subire animo sustineris, tantum tecum auferas (Val. Max. 3.3.ext.7).

The didactic force of the passage is underlined by the use of the second person addressee. The scene described here sounds as if it is modeled on the morning *salutatio*, where clients would visit the house of their patron for the *sportula*, the daily hand-out of money or food. Here the personification of Virtus plays the role of patron seated in the inner chamber of her house, receiving her clients; in the place of money, the goddess doles out virtuous qualities to those who present themselves to her, in accordance with the capacity of their soul for virtue, and not with their position in the Roman social hierarchy. The *salutatio* is a Roman institution that most emphatically underlines the Roman social system, the distinction of class and status within it, and the corresponding differentiation of social role. As is typical of his work, then, Valerius thereby reinforces Roman social hierarchy even as he is challenging its monopoly on virtue.²⁵ Through the various exempla

²⁴ Knight 2006; see discussion in the [previous chapter](#).

²⁵ As Krasser argues, on the one hand Valerius does not fundamentally question traditional social hierarchies, but on the other hand he may be making the case for broadening the space of social reference (Krasser 2011: 247).

collected together under this rubric (discussed in [Chapter 7](#)), Valerius draws further distinctions between the educated and the uneducated, the lowest on social scale and highest, with the overarching principle that virtue is equally available to all.²⁶

In this chapter of Valerius Maximus' work the association of Mucius with this social inclusivity is only there implicitly, through the juxtaposition of his exemplum with this strongly expressed message. However, in the following generation, Seneca explicitly takes Mucius himself as an example of the uneducated soldier, describing him as 'an uneducated man, who was not equipped with any precepts against death or suffering, and was endowed only with military strength', *hominem non eruditum nec ullis praeceptis contra mortem aut dolorem subornatum, militari tantum robore instructum* (Sen. *Ep.* 24.5). In further developing this same trope of virtue among the uneducated, he uses Mucius directly to support the claim that even the roughest military man can attain the heights of virtue, and that virtue is not restricted to the social and political elites. This shift in Mucius' social status is closely tied, then, to a broader identifiable trend towards a more socially inclusive exemplarity over the course of the first century that is reflected in the works of Seneca and Valerius Maximus. One reason that sites of exemplarity change, then, is so that exciting and powerful stories can serve the interests of new groups within society or new concepts of societal relations.

Another trend that affects the Mucius site is the gradual waning of the patriotic tone that saturates the archetypal traditional republican exempla that we examined in [Chapter 1](#). This shift is associated with the transition to the imperial regime in which self-sacrifice for the sake of the state becomes less meaningful. In those archetypal stories, virtue is typically represented as enacted on behalf of the state and also rewarded by honour that is subsequently bestowed on the hero by the state, and by commemoration by the community.²⁷ When Cicero evoked Mucius' deed, he evoked him as a patriotic hero, whose deed was performed on behalf of his country. Often, as we have seen, such a deed involves the sacrifice of personal goods such as family or friendship. As we move into the first century CE, however, we see a distinct shift away from patriotic virtue towards something less directed towards serving the wider civic or military community. As we have seen in [Chapter 6](#), Seneca alludes to this consensus

²⁶ On Valerius as including a wider social range in his exempla, see Krasser 2011 and Desideri 2007 on the incorporation of non-elite and foreign examples within his corpus.

²⁷ On this model, see Roller 2004.

about Mucius as patriotic hero, but at the same time in his own treatment seems to be shifting away from a focus on patriotic virtue towards Stoic virtue, so that the field of relevance for Mucius' actions is narrowed. The city and community fall away, and the story focuses primarily on Mucius' relationship with his own body and his ability to withstand pain as an admirable virtue in itself. Indeed, Heikkinen has suggested that in Seneca's treatment of Mucius we can see an attempt to conflate personal Stoic virtues with public military ones, by creating a figure who can deliver on both at once: to the non-Stoic, 'uneducated interlocutor, who has not achieved the Stoic ideal, Mucius would be an example of a person courageously loathing his body, while at the same time trying to keep in mind the interests and hopes of his fellow citizens. Indeed, if the example is to fulfil its purpose, the well-being of society should be thought as primary in Senecan Mucius. For a Stoic on the other hand, Mucius clearly simply despises fire, and, by means of it, his body instead of any other interests.'²⁸ This treatment of Mucius belongs to a more general shift that Seneca effects away from an external, communally validated morality towards Stoic ethics, where moral value is located within an abstract philosophical system.²⁹ Clara Berrendonner describes this as a transition from Cicero's exemplary virtue, which is always in service of the Republic, towards Seneca's *perfecta virtus*, deployed in the philosophical domain and as part of a more general transition from civic to private.³⁰

This shift towards a more philosophical colouring for exempla is one that has been identified by several scholars as a feature of Seneca's work,³¹ but it is also a feature that can already be found in the work of Valerius Maximus. We have seen that Mucius' association with philosophy is established there, and this is true of other exempla, too (for instance, the slave of Tagus discussed later in this chapter). As we saw in [Chapter 7](#), in

²⁸ Heikkinen 1997: 69. ²⁹ Roller 2001: 88–97 on Seneca's rejection of the external validation.

³⁰ Berrendonner 2001: 108 'Il ne propose qu'une modèle de conduit individuel issu d'une réflexion philosophique', and, on the shift between Cicero and Seneca, 'Chez Cicéron, le grand homme doit incarner un comportement moral exemplaire, mais cet état n'est que le préalable nécessaire à l'exercice de grandes actions au service de la République. Chez Sénèque, le grand homme se définit par la possession de la *perfecta virtus*; qui se compose de la bonté, la mesure, la patience, la prudence, l'effort et la constance. La vertu n'a plus désormais ni contenu ni finalité civique, elle ne se déploie plus que dans le domaine philosophique, donc privé' (Berrendonner 2001: 108–109).

³¹ Seneca's work has been read from a number of different angles as providing evidence of a broader social and intellectual shift during the mid-first century in response to deep-seated social and political changes of this time. For the relevance of this to exempla, cf. Mencacci 2001: 417 on Seneca using Curius and Fabricius not as figures of civic virtue, as they have been previously, but as figures of personal virtue for the Stoic sage, which she uses as her key example of the changing significance of exemplary stories in the first century; Berrendonner 2001; Roller 2001.

this same chapter 3.3, Valerius Maximus alludes to this erosion of the community framework of evaluation, and draws attention to possible problematic implications; through his representation of the Indian fakirs who practise physical endurance for its own sake and with no greater purpose in mind, Valerius seems to be urging his reader to consider the implications of breaking away from traditional values of the community, to a more individualistic form of virtue.³² Thus the ‘problem’ of exempla – generated by clashes between community and philosophy and external and internal validation – that Roller has perceptively identified³³ is articulated in Seneca’s writings as arising from the new Stoic ethical framework that is developed partly as a response to new social structures, but it is already embedded in exemplary ethics by the time Valerius is writing.

It is not possible fully to unpick the process by which the Mucius story evolved over the centuries, to ascertain how far back it can be traced, or what form it took in earlier periods, or to pinpoint the exact origin of its key features. What is clear from the ancient texts that survive, however, is that it did change over time, sometimes through the gentle, imperceptible process inevitable during linear transmission, and sometimes with a more dramatic transformation in content and emphasis, possibly in response to changing social and ethical needs. While remaining over the centuries a central and venerated Roman exemplum, it was able to change with the years and to integrate new twists without losing its authenticity. Such an integration of a new motif of course also entails a ‘forgetting’ that the motif was not part of the tradition before. This diachronic study of the Mucius site of exemplarity makes it quite clear that it does not represent a carefully preserved tradition that we can trace directly back to an origin in the early days of Rome. The site was constantly in flux even as the story was diligently handed down through the generations. If there was a tradition surrounding a figure called Mucius back in the third or fourth centuries BCE, it is impossible to deduce without contemporary evidence what this story might have been. Any or all of the components that are found in the first centuries BCE and CE might have abruptly entered the tradition just before we find them, covering their tracks so as to present an authentic original feel.

The Smiling Slave

In this next section I shall trace the emergence in this period of a particular new exemplum, ‘the smiling slave’, which further illustrates the process by

³² Chapter 7, 157–159. ³³ Roller 2001: 88–97.

which individual exempla emerge and develop within Roman culture. Its emergence as an exemplum also demonstrates the continuing vibrancy of exemplary ethics over the course of the first century. This exemplum develops from the story of an anonymous Spanish slave who died in 221 BCE, punished because he had killed the Carthaginian tyrant Hasdrubal in order to avenge the execution of his master Tagus. He was tortured to death by the Carthaginians but throughout maintained a smile on his face. We first find the story cast as an exemplum in the work of Valerius Maximus in about 30 CE, although the episode allegedly took place nearly two hundred years earlier.

The nature of this historical episode as it is related in Latin literary sources changes quite significantly over the course of the first century; in sum, an odd minor episode of the First Punic War, with no particular moral charge, develops into an exemplum of *fides* and *patientia* that stands alongside the prominent Roman heroic exempla of Mucius and Regulus, gains a philosophical significance to match theirs, and becomes entwined with their sites of exemplarity. Along the way the developing story blends motifs and ethical and descriptive modes, so that this strange episode from Carthaginian history, part of the history of Hasdrubal's death, becomes recognisably part of the Roman exemplary heroic terrain. In the works of Valerius Maximus, Seneca and Silius Italicus, the tale is configured with familiar narrative patterns and descriptive elements. The development of this story provides an illustration of various aspects of diachronic journeys of exempla: the way that stories move in and out of the exemplary framework and acquire and lose emphases and details; the closeness of the exemplum form to the *paradoxon*, and what it is that distinguishes the two modes of storytelling; the continued vibrancy of exemplary ethics over the first century; the way that sites of exemplarity share motifs and values, and that new exempla are fashioned from familiar materials.

The earliest extant source for this tale is Livy, who relates it during his account of the First Punic War as an uncanny *paradoxon* associated with the assassination of Hasdrubal.³⁴ To judge from his account, the story seems to have been established in the historiographical tradition as memorable for its oddity (in the mode of paradoxography) rather than for any

³⁴ Mentions of the murder of Hasdrubal the Fair in the Greek sources (Polybius 2.36, Appian 1.151 and Diod. 25.12) do not mention the subsequent punishment of the perpetrator. Polyb. 2.36 mentions that Hasdrubal was assassinated by a Celt to avenge a private wrong, but makes no mention of the assassin's punishment. He does however make a point of saying, like Livy, that Hasdrubal had ruled the region well and done much to establish friendly relations with the Spanish chieftains, in stark contrast with the characterisation of Hasdrubal in Silius Italicus' account in *Punica* Book 1.

heroism or virtue. It is the peculiar story of a man who most unexpectedly laughed while he was being tortured rather than crying out and weeping in agony. The laughter is the memorable and striking element of the story, but its significance is open to interpretation.

In Livy's brief version the story is not presented as an illustration of Carthaginian tyranny or cruelty, as it will be in later texts. On the contrary, Livy says explicitly that Hasdrubal has maintained friendly relations with the Spaniards, but is no safer for being at peace:

But peace was no safer for him; some barbarian slaughtered him publicly because he was angry that his master had been killed by him; when this man had been captured by bystanders, as far as his facial expression went it was as if he had escaped them – even while he was being ripped apart with tortures, he had an expression on his face as if happiness was triumphant, and he even appeared to be laughing at the pain.

ceterum nihil ei pax tutior fuit; barbarus eum quidam palam ob iram interfecti ab eo domini obruncavit; comprehensusque ab circumstantibus haud alio quam si evasisset vultu tormentis quoque cum laceraretur, eo fuit habitu oris ut superante laetitia dolores ridentis etiam speciem prae-buerit (Liv. *Hist.* 21.2.6).

Livy's morally neutral account of the episode helps us to appreciate how the exemplary nature of a story arises not so much from the events that a story relates, as from the way that the story is told and its interpretative framework.

As in the case of Mucius, it is once again in the early imperial work of Valerius Maximus that we first find the story presented within a framework that reshapes it as a moral exemplum. This torture of the barbarian slave is the final example (3.3.ext.7) in the list of exempla of *patientia* that began with a version of the story of the patriotic tale of Mucius Scaevola; the chapter thus establishes a moral connection between the two tales that is echoed in later works. This story of the vengeful slave is also explicitly associated here with the philosophical issues with which Valerius associates Mucius, including the valuing of physical endurance and personal ethics, a move away from patriotism, with a simultaneous expression of anxiety about whether this move represents a loss of moral centre, and the important principle that virtue is not just for the elite, but is accessible by people from all works of life.³⁵

Valerius includes in his brief summary of the tale an explanation for the odd laughter, concluding that the slave was pleased that he had avenged his

³⁵ See [Chapter 7](#), for further examination of Val. Max. 3.3 and how the two stories frame the chapter.

master, and therefore explaining it as a sign of virtuous motivation and inner strength, rather than as a freakish response and a marvel. If Valerius is indeed the first Roman author to recast this story explicitly as an exemplum, this explanation may even function as a generic marker, indicating the transformation of a paradoxical tale into something with more moral bite. His explanation certainly introduces the moral heft that is lacking from Livy's version:

Those [previous] exempla arose in high-born and well-educated breasts, a slave's spirit initiated this next which is, however, no less admirable. A barbarian slave, unable to stand the fact that Hasdrubal had killed his master, immediately approached and slayed him, and when he was seized and tortured in every way, nevertheless he displayed without faltering an expression of happiness on his face, which he drew from his revenge.

haec e pectoribus altis et eruditis orta sunt, illud tamen non minus admirabile servilis animus cepit. servus barbarus Hasdrubalem, quod dominum suum occidisset grauiter ferens, subito adgressus interemit, cumque comprehensus omni modo cruciaretur, laetitiam tamen, quam ex vindicta ceperat, in ore constantissime retinuit (Val. Max. 3.3.ext.7).

The slave's lack of name underlines his lowly status, in conjunction with the emphasis in the sources on his servile status and his barbarian identity. This is an illustration of the place that is found within the Roman exempla tradition for these low-status, unnamed exemplary figures alongside the famous heroes of history, whose anonymity and humility is usually an important feature of their exemplary power.³⁶ Valerius goes on to use this story as the springboard for the important programmatic passage in which he urges the principle that anyone, no matter how lowly their status, can aspire to virtue.³⁷ Most significantly though, the immediate context for the story and this programmatic reflection in the rest of the chapter on *patientia* is the promotion of the value of philosophy for arming people against the troubles they encounter in their lives. The previous foreign examples (3.3.ext.2–7) have all been of Greek philosophers standing up to tyrants in a variety of gruesome ways. 'Laughing on the rack' is re-contextualised within this Roman exemplary ethics so that this becomes a heroic (anti-tyrannical Stoic) gesture rather than uncanny behaviour.

By the time that Seneca is writing in the following generation, the story seems to be well known, despite the fact that the slave never acquires

³⁶ Guerrini 1981: 16 on the way that the humility of an anonymous exemplum can itself enhance the moral significance of the deed.

³⁷ See earlier discussion.

a name.³⁸ At any rate, Seneca is able to refer to it casually among the moral exempla he uses in his letters to Lucilius, without feeling the need to flesh out the story any more than he does for the Roman exempla Mucius or Fabricius or Regulus. Indeed, he refers to it so casually as to make it plain that this is a familiar exemplum whose details can be called to mind by a reader in a flash without need of further elaboration, even with an oblique reference. One Senecan reference is simply to ‘the man whose laughter the torturer did not interrupt’ (*cuius risum non interromperet tortor*, Sen. *Ep.* 76.20) alongside ‘the man who put his hand in the fire’ (i.e. Mucius). Elsewhere he describes him as: ‘The man who did not stop laughing when furious torturers were applying every instrument of cruelty to him’, (*ille qui non desiit ridere cum hoc ipsum irati tortores omnia instrumenta crudelitatis suae experirentur*). And he goes on to draw the following ethical conclusion: ‘Is not suffering conquered by reason, when it is conquered by laughter?’ (*non vincetur dolor ratione, qui victus est risu?* *Ep.* 78.18). Seneca’s references present the episode as one that is philosophically interesting; its fate also seems to be bound up in the philosophical intensification of the exemplum of Mucius in this period.

When Silius Italicus writes his epic account of the Second Punic War, *Punica*, under the rule of the Flavian emperors in the last decades of the first century CE, he is able to treat Tagus’ laughing slave as a well-established exemplum. This episode is, indeed, the first exemplum cited in an epic poem that is fundamentally engaged with the exemplary tradition. Its use is programmatic, evoking many key characteristics of Silius’ exemplary project, including an exemplary ethics that is not wholly centred on Roman heroes and acknowledges that virtue can be found in slaves and foreigners as well, and that explicitly engages with Stoic philosophy.³⁹ In Silius’ gruesome description of this episode, the anonymous slave remains mentally unaffected by the torture even as his body disintegrates around him. His flesh melts away and his bones carry on smoking, yet he dies with his mind untouched – the Latin is *mens intacta* – laughing and taunting his torturers:

³⁸ His story is often associated with the name of his master Tagus, understandably, and occasionally modern scholars confuse the two and take Tagus to be the name of the slave himself (Inwood 2007 on Sen. *Ep.* 76.20 confuses the smiling slave with Hasdrubal himself, citing Livy 21.2).

³⁹ The philosophical engagement of Silius (especially his use of Stoic themes and ideas) and his use of traditional exemplary figures to explore ethical ideas are well established: see Ripoll 2000; Littlewood 2011: lxviii; Dominik 2009: 429–430. The psychomachy in Book 15.18–128, where Scipio encounters the personifications of Voluptas and Virtus (Pleasure and Virtue) and has to choose between them, might be considered a dramatisation of ethical deliberation in the epic mode (on this episode, see Marks 2005: 148–161; Tipping 2010: 156–160).

When he saw his master hanging on the deadly tree, disfigured by death, the servant secretly seized the sword that had been cherished by his master, swiftly burst into the palace, and struck the savage chest with a double blow. But the Carthaginians, aroused as they were by anger and disturbed by grief, and being a race that revels in savagery, rushed to fetch instruments of torture. They gave him no respite from torture with fire, white-hot steel, from flogging that ripped his lacerated body to shreds with innumerable blows all over, from torturing hands, from agony that burrowed deep into the marrow, the flames burning in the heart of the wound. Dreadful to witness and to speak of – he was stretched on the rack through that cruel art, and his limbs grew as much as the tortures required, and, when all the blood had burst out of him, his bones smoked and burned even after his limbs had dissolved. But his mind remained intact; he rose above the suffering and laughed at them. And, as if he were only a spectator, he criticised the torturers when they were tiring in their work, and loudly demanded to be crucified with his master.

quem postquam diro suspensum robore vidit
deformem leti favulus, clam corripit ensem
dilectum domino pernixque irrumpit in aulam
atque immite ferit geminato vulnere pectus.
at Poeni, succensa ira turbataque luctu
et saevis gens laeta, ruunt tormentaue portant.
non ignes candensque chlabys, non verbera passim
ictibus innumeris lacerum scindentia corpus,
carnificaeve manus pentiusve infusa medullis
pestis et in medio lucentes vulnere flammae
cessavere; ferrum visu dictuque, per artem
saevitiae extenti, quantum tormenta iubebant,
creverunt artus, atque, omni sanguine rupto,
ossa liquefactis fumarunt fervida membris.
mens intacta manet; superat ridetque dolores,
spectanti similis, fessoque labore ministros
inrepatat dominique crucem clamore resposcit

(Sil. *Pun.* 1.165–181).

In the context of *Punica*, this story helps to set up the Carthaginian background to the Second Punic War that occupies the opening of the epic, and to establish the Carthaginian enemy as typically cruel and barbaric. However, Silius' treatment of the exemplum also conjures up the wider exemplary terrain, showing how stories share motifs that enable them to strengthen their moral significance and play off one another. Silius crafts this exemplum through the blending of motifs from Regulus and Mucius and other exempla and with deliberate allusion both to the wider sites of exemplarity and to specific literary remediations of those sites – in

this case the treatments of this and associated exempla by Valerius Maximus and Seneca. With his allusions to other treatments of other authors Silius indicates that he is aware of the ethical and even philosophical potential of such stories.⁴⁰ This slave takes on the characteristics of Regulus – tortured by the Carthaginians and willingly submitting to their torture. Like Regulus, he relishes the opportunity to be hoisted onto the cross in a punishment that should constitute the ultimate humiliation, but manages to rise above the degradation of torture. In the context of this poem, this unspoken allusion to Regulus connects us with the Punic Wars and the earlier entanglements between Romans and Carthaginians, and also reminds us of the moral charge that has grown up around the figure of Regulus.⁴¹

As we have seen, Tagus' slave is associated with the figure of Mucius Scaevola by both Valerius Maximus and Seneca. Silius, too, makes clear allusion in his description of the slave to the story of Mucius Scaevola. Several elements of Silius' version are reminiscent of aspects of Mucius' tale. Mucius too was a man who sneaked into an enemy camp in order to kill a king (although he failed, unlike Tagus' slave). A particularly resonant line is: 'The bones still burned and smoked after the limbs had melted away' (*ossa liquefactis fumarunt fervida membris*, 1.178), since, as we know, Mucius is by this time especially memorable for the fact that he burned his hand completely to the bone, so that all the flesh melted away, as in Seneca's repeated use of the term 'melting' (*distillant*, Sen. *Epp.* 24.5, 66.52). There may also be in this passage a direct allusion to Seneca's treatment of Mucius Scaevola in *Ep.* 24.4, where Mucius' Stoic detachment from his own suffering is described in terms of his being like a spectator to his own body's sufferings. Silius, too, describes the Spanish slave as being 'like a spectator' (*spectanti similis*, 1.180).⁴² In any case, this aspect of the description is overtly philosophical – as is the phrase *mens intacta* at 1.179 – and relates to precisely those Stoic ideas about the body as an 'indifferent' and the capacity of highly virtuous individuals to withstand and rise above physical pain that are explored in these *Letters* of Seneca.⁴³ Silius is casting this exemplum as resonant with the theme of physical

⁴⁰ See the discussion of Danesi Maroni 1989 on the philosophical aspects of Silius' treatment of this tale.

⁴¹ See further Chapter 12 on the complexities of the Regulus exemplum, and Chapter 13 on Silius' literary exploitation of Regulus to draw out some key ethical ideas.

⁴² On this line as alluding to Seneca *Ep.* 24.4, see Danesi Maroni 1989.

⁴³ See Chapter 3 for Seneca's deployment of Mucius' exemplum in his philosophical writings. On Stoic 'indifferents', see Sellars 2006: 111.

endurance and its moral implications that we have seen are characteristic of Valerius Maximus and Seneca, alongside a shift away from a nationalistic frame, that acknowledges that people from outside Rome may have something to live and die for too, a principle that adds piquancy to the fate of the people of Saguntum and others who die in the course of the poem.

There are specific similarities with the trajectory of the Mucius site: the introduction of memorable exemplary elements, the moral charge, the sense that what is valued is perseverance and physical stamina and the ability to withstand pain and discomfort. It is likely that the culturally dominant story of Mucius, with its newly prominent feature of the burning hand and physical endurance has drawn the story of this anonymous slave into its orbit, and shaped its form. At the same time both these stories, with other contemporary exempla, are being shaped by similar forces: the emerging ethical and social preoccupations of the first century. Like the Mucius exemplum, this exemplum transcends the patriotic framework within which our archetypal exempla acquired their significance. Valerius explicitly links this very smiling slave exemplum in his work with the idea that virtue and heroism are accessible to many kinds of people, not just those who are high born, and this exemplum is part of his collection's opening up the possibilities for exemplary and heroic behaviour, with new arenas for heroism, new kinds of people labelled heroes, and new kinds of acts held up as exemplary. In addition to its association with the archetypal exempla, this episode also participates in the 'loyal slave' strand of the exemplary tradition, discussed briefly in [Chapter 3](#), a model of exemplarity that became very strong in the latter part of the first century and early second century but is also found resonating in Valerius' work.⁴⁴ The history of this little site of exemplarity serves to illustrate how swiftly a story can be transformed within the overlapping frameworks of cultural memory and the literary tradition, and shows how existing and familiar motifs are patched together and blended to make new stories and new versions of old stories that can be easily assimilated into the tradition. In the case of the smiling slave, a new moral exemplum emerges out of historical material that did not possess that exemplary flavour in Livy's version, a generation before Valerius.

As both cases discussed in this chapter show, each exemplum or site of exemplarity has its own trajectory and history. Often these sites develop along parallel lines to one another, and appear to reflect broader changes in

⁴⁴ For the exemplary type, see Parker [1998](#), although he does not make reference to this particular exemplum.

the exemplary terrain. For instance, as we have seen, the sites of the smiling slave and of Mucius both reflect increasing Stoic influence, with an increasing emphasis on overcoming personal suffering.⁴⁵ However, it is also the case that many sites of exemplarity do not match perfectly with others in terms of trajectory. The exemplum of the smiling slave seems to emerge later, after Livy's day, although it is in Livy that we first find the emphasis on physical endurance in Mucius' case. The histories of individual sites put together do not always add up to a coherent story about the development of Roman exemplary ethics more generally. Although shared trends can be noted, often similar changes (such as the transition from patriotism to personal) take place at rather different times, or a single author will take different exempla in very different directions. We must resist then being too generalising or too rigid about the story that we tell about the development of exemplary ethics over this period; there are many different stories that can be told depending on which sources are read. It is perhaps best not to extrapolate a clear narrative, but rather to see a vibrant tradition where stories and motifs continue to wax and wane to different rhythms. The [next chapter](#), however, will sketch a diachronic overview of this broader terrain of exemplary ethics, identifying key trends and sounding a warning note about some narratives of change that have been proposed by other scholars.

⁴⁵ And cf. trajectories of the traditions of individual exemplary figures traced in the volume edited by Coudry and Späth 2001, of Camillus (Coudry 2001), Coriolanus (David 2001), Fabricius and Curius (Berrendonner 2001), Duilius and Regulus (Gendre and Loutsch 2001).

Diachronic Overview of the Exemplary Terrain

While the [previous chapter](#) traced two particular sites of exemplarity over the first century, this chapter takes an overview of the whole exemplary terrain from the murky origins of the third century BCE to the end of the first century CE, and explores broad shifts that may have taken place over the course of the period under consideration in this volume. Just as each individual site of exemplarity does not remain static and stable over this period but has a history, so, too, does the whole terrain of exemplarity. It is not merely the individual sites within this terrain that change their content and significance over time, as some become defunct and new sites emerge, the terrain itself also changes at the ‘meta-exemplary’ level. That is to say, the role that exemplary ethics plays within Roman culture is subject to change, as is the way that exempla are deployed by and referred to by literary works, and the dominant modes of engagement with exemplary material.

One persuasive narrative about the development of the Roman exempla tradition over time is articulated in Uwe Walter’s book *Memoria und Res Publica: Zur Geschichteskultur im republikanischen Rom*. In his account, exempla emerged as an important way of thinking about and with the past during the third century BC as a result of aristocratic competition and national expansion. They then flourished as an adaptable resource held in common by the Roman community in the late Republic.¹ In his [final chapter](#) Walter suggests that in the imperial period, the system began to break down. A similar narrative of an aristocratic Republican practice that declines in the imperial era is also adopted by other scholars, with nuances that I shall outline in this chapter.² I have some reservations about this

¹ Walter 2004. On the non-literary media through which aristocratic families commemorated their exempla in this period, including tombs, statues, and coinage after the 130s BCE, see also Blom 2010: 88–93 with further bibliography.

² See e.g. Walter 2004: 426; cf. Hölkeskamp 1996; Chaplin 2000; Coudry and Späth 2001; Kraus 2005; Gowing 2005.

chronological framework; many of the features of exempla that other scholars have taken as evidence of change can be taken more plausibly as enduring features of ever-adaptable Roman exemplarity that persist over the period in question, though their emphases may differ over time and in different kinds of texts. There are certain continuities and persistent tensions inherent in Roman exemplary ethics that can give the misleading impression of change taking place, such as claims of the disjunction between past and present, debates about the relative merits of older and more recent exempla, the idea that exempla are becoming hackneyed and obvious and thereby losing their ethical force, the expression of anxiety about the monopoly over exempla of families with impressive pedigrees and *imagines*. The importance of genre for determining how exempla are presented must not be underestimated, and it, too, undermines our ability to trace a clear narrative about exempla. The broad chronological and generic overview provided by my study enables us to appreciate firstly that there was ethical ambiguity and conflict in exempla from the earliest times and secondly that exempla continued to flourish through the first century CE as an important structure of thought.

The methodological problems involved in positing diachronic change for the earlier period of the mid- to late-Republic in the absence of adequate source material for the period before 133 BCE have already been identified by Walter.³ We simply do not have enough evidence from this period to substantiate directly any claims we might want to make about it, and there is very little source material even from the seventy or so years after that date before we reach Cicero's time. Cicero deploys exempla extensively in his speeches and philosophical works, and these represent our earliest substantial body of source material for exempla in the Republic.⁴ We can attempt to reconstruct a picture of exemplary ethics in his lifetime and earlier, but there are important caveats. Cicero's use of exemplary references makes it clear that exemplary stories were in wide circulation in his day, but it is not always clear what form the sites of exemplarity to which these exempla refer take, nor how long they had been in existence in that form, nor whether Cicero's use of them conforms to a traditional consensus or takes the consensus as a springboard for innovation, as we

³ Walter 2004: 60.

⁴ The bibliography on Cicero's use of exempla is extensive: e.g. Bücher 2006 on his speeches, Gildenhard 2007 on the way he loses faith in exempla towards the end of his life (in *Tusculan Disputations*), Fox 2007 on exempla within the context of Cicero's treatment of history, Blom 2010 on the way he deploys exempla to construct his own persona, Brooke on exempla within the context of Cicero's treatment of *maiores*.

have seen is often the case with talented writers and thinkers in ancient Rome. In her recent study of Cicero's attitudes towards the ancestors (*maiores*), Eleanor Brooke describes their value to him as that of a 'blank cheque'; that is to say, they were both extremely valuable as rhetorical reference points, and also open to use in a variety of ways. She describes the way that Cicero and his peers negotiate the significance of exemplary stories anew in each context, as if they are working with a complex tradition in which the significance of each story is open to interpretation and debate.⁵ This is a very similar model to that outlined in [Chapter 7](#), where it was associated with declamation; however, how recently it had been established and how much it owed to the oratorical training of Cicero and his peers is less clear.

Matthew Fox has argued that Cicero is innovative in his treatment of history in that he treats familiar material in such a way as to make its philosophical dimensions apparent.⁶ (At the start of the [following chapter](#), we will see how this works in Cicero's treatment in *De finibus* of the exemplum of Torquatus.) Fox sees Cicero as introducing 'plurality rather than dogmatism' into the treatment of the exemplary past, reinterpreting and opening up the significance of past events. Cicero's commitment to the 'academic' method of arguing around all sides of a case or issue without necessarily coming to a firm conclusion, which was closely related to his rhetorical training, is something that we find echoed in the exemplary ethics of first-century literature, discussed in the [following chapter](#).⁷ Perhaps it was Cicero himself, with his powerful commitment to synthesising rhetoric and philosophy for Roman politics, who introduced into the culture of exemplarity in Rome these features of indeterminacy and controversy which later become fundamental to exemplary ethics.

On the other hand, these may have already been features of Roman exemplary ethics before Cicero's day, on which Cicero was building. Cicero's philosophical ideas and his critical 'academic' stance, which insists on exploring arguments from every side, were shaped by Greek philosophers who lived and worked in Rome, such as Panaetius, Posidonius, and

⁵ The author has kindly shared with me a draft of this work in progress based on her doctoral research at Cambridge.

⁶ Fox 2007. Ingo Gildenhard also views Cicero as making a decisive intervention in Roman thought, suggesting that Cicero 'adopted vantage points on, rather than within, the logic of Roman practice, often with a view to interventions and reform. In short, he theorised' (Gildenhard 2007: 387).

⁷ As Julia Annas puts it: 'We can see how congenial Academic scepticism would be to someone to whom forensic practices of arguing were familiar, encouraging the thought that argument for and against a position was a good way to approach the truth of a matter, while encouraging intellectual modesty in the arguers as to their own grasp of it' (Annas 2016: 1).

especially the Stoic Diodotus, who lived in Cicero's house until his death in 59 BCE. The philosophical ideas of these men were likely to have been influenced by an existing indigenous Roman tradition of exemplary ethics. Several philosophers, including Zeno, Panaetius and Posidonius, are described as using Roman exemplary stories in their philosophical works, and Stoicism came to be closely associated with exempla in the developing tradition.⁸ Perhaps what we see in the philosophical works of Cicero and his Greek predecessors is a preliminary theorisation of an existing, lived exemplary ethics.⁹

Evidence that the exemplary terrain was already rich and complex comes from the anonymously authored *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, a handbook setting out rhetorical techniques, which was published in the late 80s BCE, at roughly the same time as Cicero's early work with the same aim, *De inventione*. Both works encourage the use of exempla in argumentation, and both deploy many specific exempla in their pages, but as Jennifer Hilder has pointed out, the *Rhetorica* tends to engage with different exempla from *De inventione*; usually they are drawn from more recent period of history than Cicero's exempla (from within the last century, whereas Cicero reaches further back into Roman history). She suggests that the work reflects a different social perspective, as a handbook written not by or for senators, but rather for a non-elite Italian audience in the expansion following the Social War. For instance, she has argued that the work seems to place a particular value on figures such as the tribune of the plebs, and that the treatment of exempla such as the murder of Tiberius Gracchus, the rebellion of Fregellae or Gaius Popilius' negotiation with the Gauls, full of moral complexity, bears traces of an alternative tradition from the 'senatorial' perspective found in Cicero's work.¹⁰ Her argument allows us a glimpse of the possibility of local variation within sites of exemplarity, with certain stories gaining particular emphasis or significance in different parts of Italy or among different sections of Roman society, and with competing interpretations of the exempla also reflecting competing social and political interests that could be frankly aired through the medium of public display, deployment and discussion of widely familiar stories.

It is certainly likely that a complex exemplary terrain had long existed by the time Cicero came on the scene, wherein Roman exempla were not just

⁸ E.g. Cic. *Fin.* 5.88 on Zeno using Metellus and Regulus; Plut. *Marc.* 9.4 on Posidonius using Fabius and Marcellus; Cic. *Att.* XVI.11 on Panaetius and exempla.

⁹ On this possibility, see Sedley 1999, Langlands 2015a.

¹⁰ Hilder 2015, especially chapter 3. On the complexity of the Gracchi within Cicero's works, see further Blom 2010: 103–107, with further bibliography in n. 108, p. 106.

a function of aristocratic commemoration and self-promotion, but rather part of a wider and more nuanced tradition of ethics focused through particular historical stories and figures. The Greek author Polybius, who lived in Rome for two decades from 168 BCE, describes how he was struck by the Roman tradition of emulating heroes within the military context, and he identifies Horatius Coclès as an archetypal Republican hero of this type (Polyb. 6.55). Matthew Leigh has suggested that pressing military and political issues of the second and third centuries, evident in the plays of Plautus, were crystallised in exemplary tales, such as the exempla of Regulus and Torquatus.¹¹ It is indeed possible that these stories first acquired the ethical charges with which they are later associated in the second and third centuries BCE when such issues were current, but there can be no evidence of this and we must be wary of retrojecting sites of exemplarity into a past from which we have no remediations, given the swiftness with which sites of exemplarity can change, or appear and disappear.

Very little literature from before the late republic survives at all, and when it does it is usually fragmentary. Among these surviving fragments, references to exempla and exemplary figures are numerous but tantalisingly incomplete.¹² Without the survival of a substantial body of written texts from that period, we are hard pressed to describe which stories were in circulation in the third and second centuries BCE or what their significance might have been, and the origins of exempla in the Republican era cannot be traced with any certainty. The lessons of Robin Hood should make us wary of attempting to reconstruct when a story might have first existed or what it might have looked like in periods prior to our earliest references. As we have seen in the case of Mucius' story, we have the merest trace of evidence prior to the works of Cicero, nothing but the brief reference in Cassius Hemina, which we deduce to have been referring to Mucius and which was preserved as an example of linguistic peculiarity by a later grammarian of the fourth or fifth century CE.¹³ We cannot rely on a continuous tradition having survived from the middle republic more or less untouched (and still less from the era of early Rome, when Mucius' adventure is supposed to have taken place). Even the memories of contemporary events, such as the Punic Wars, or the careers of Sulla and

¹¹ Leigh 2004. For further discussion of the ethical issues associated with Regulus and Torquatus, see Chapters 12 and 13.

¹² Cf. Beck and Walter 2004 under '*exempla*' in index; Goldschmidt 2013: 164 for a list of some exempla cited here, on 163–165 on exempla in the Republic in general.

¹³ Cornell 2013, vol. 3: 170.

Marius, are volatile and changeable over this period. We cannot guarantee that 'traditional' exempla cited by late Republican writers such as Cicero had not been recently invented or had not recently acquired their dominant significance. This acknowledgement of our ignorance is an important principle to carry into our investigation of the emergence of exempla more generally.

Over the past decades Peter Wiseman has argued persuasively for the importance of a preexisting performance tradition through which exemplary stories were transmitted.¹⁴ He suggests, for instance, that the exemplary tales of Mucius, Cloelia and Horatius Cocles might well have been among the aetiological legends of Rome performed as part of the annual festival of the Floralia.¹⁵ Wiseman's thesis allows us to posit a tradition that is not reliant on written texts, and he argues that it is only in the subsequent canonical literary tradition (including works of historiography and epic) that these existing exemplary tales are brought together in written works in the service of elite ideology in order to glorify the six leading aristocratic families.¹⁶ Through his study of ancient performance cultures, he explores the attractive possibility that exemplary stories might have been generated and circulated as part of a popular tradition, accessible far beyond the elite and independent of aristocratic family traditions, and his work suggests the infrastructure through which such popular exemplary ethics might have operated. It is likely that the theatrical tradition of *fabulae togatae*, which dramatised episodes from Roman history, was one of the most important media for the dissemination of exemplary stories, as several scholars have argued, but barely a trace of these plays survives directly. Their loss is particularly irritating because they would have offered us insight into popular engagement with exempla, as well as a sense of how they might have been used to explore social and ethical issues in this period.¹⁷ The extent to which theatrical stagings of historical and exemplary events were influential in shaping communal understanding of the past as exemplary and controversial will never be definitively established, but it seems

¹⁴ Wiseman 1995: 133–138, Wiseman 2008. Cf. Coudry and Späth 2001: 189, where Peter L. Schmidt emphasises the importance of oral tradition during 'une phase pré-historiographique', which predates even our earliest written sources. See also Walter 2004: 75–83.

¹⁵ Wiseman 2008: 180.

¹⁶ On the emergence of literature in Roman as a cultural tool of the elite, see Habinek 1998, and Sciarrino 2011 specifically on Cato the Elder.

¹⁷ The comedies of Terence and Plautus from this period, many of which do survive, do not make direct reference to historical heroes, although they often include reference to more general exemplary tropes, e.g. Demea's speech in Terence *Adelphoe*, lines 414–480) on ethical learning and the importance of taking the lives of others as the model for one's own behaviour.

highly plausible that Roman theatre was an important mode of commemoration, and that it enabled events to be cast and recast in vivid form.¹⁸

One of the most important of the earlier literary works that entwined historical exempla with elite interests was Ennius' hugely influential epic poem *Annales*, written in the 180s BCE, which traced the history of Rome from its origins to the Second Punic War (in which Ennius himself was a participant) and now survives only in snippets cited in later authors. Recently described as 'that great filter of republican exempla',¹⁹ the *Annales* must have been instrumental in shaping Roman understanding of their own past and its exemplary potential at the beginning of the second century.²⁰ Another regrettable loss is of most of the writings of the first Latin prose author, Cato the Elder, whose *Origines* (written c.168 BCE) was a history of Rome and other Italian cities, and is thought to have brought a new perspective to the Roman past, challenging the cultural dominance of the Roman *nobiles*.²¹ The longest surviving fragment of Cato the Elder's *Origines* casts the self-sacrifice of an unnamed tribune as an exemplum to compete with the Greek paradigm of Leonidas; this man volunteered to lead a detachment of four hundred men to certain death against the Carthaginians during the Second Punic War in order to allow the rest of the army to escape.²² If this fragment is representative of the oeuvre, this strongly suggests that this work presented its historical materials within a framework of exemplary ethics; it is also represented in the same competitive spirit in relation to Greek history that we find expressed in authors such as Cicero and Valerius Maximus. It is reasonable to conclude that Cato's work must have been full of exemplary tales from Roman and Italian history, perhaps consciously creating new exempla in line with his challenge to aristocratic claims to virtue. As scholars have noted, Cato makes a point of not naming any of the heroes whose deeds he celebrated in his work, and this has been interpreted as a deliberate move to counter the idea that virtues run in particular aristocratic families, in order to re-appropriate exemplary stories and motifs for a broader constituency including 'new men' (*novi homines*) like himself.²³ As Molly Pasco-Pranger

¹⁸ On the importance of these plays as a popular historical medium, see Wiseman 1998 and Bruun 2000: 66–67, as a medium for exempla Walter 2004: 75–83, Morstein-Marx 2004: 70; Jaeger 2008: 192–193, n. 56.

¹⁹ Jaeger 2008: 193, n. 66.

²⁰ On this, see Goldschmidt 2013. Cf. Wiseman 2008, chapter 3 on the possible influence of Ennius on popular knowledge of early Roman history and also perhaps on written historiography.

²¹ Sciarrino 2011, Pasco-Pranger 2015. ²² Cornell 2013, fragment 3 4.7a; Peter 1906 F. 83.

²³ Krebs 2006 on this passage; Sciarrino 2011 on Cato's contribution to Latin culture; Pasco-Pranger 2015 on Cato's establishment of himself as an exemplary model.

puts it: 'The movement of the exemplary into the literary presents a challenge to the concentration of Roman aristocratic virtues in the scions of a few families, a challenge that is characteristic of Cato, the new man.'²⁴ By not naming the military commanders, he suppresses their associations with particular leading Roman families and presents them as belonging equally to all Romans.²⁵ Cato also celebrates the deeds of the ordinary soldier as well as the high-ranking general. His work is the earliest extant Roman source that appears to challenge the close association in some parts of Roman society of virtue, nobility and exemplarity with certain leading Roman families, but he is by no means the only writer to do so.

Therefore, there is an important counter-argument to be made against the notion that the earlier Republican period was a time of ideological consensus about exempla that then broke down in the late Republic under the pressure of social change. Walter's hypothesis is that increasing ambiguity in the meaning of exempla in the late republic was linked to a breakdown in community spirit. The argument rests on the assumption that in an early period exempla bore a unified, communally understood significance, where ancestral exempla were accepted as unproblematically relevant to the present in a way that they could no longer be after the transformative events of the late republic. This is, of course, unattested by any extant literary evidence – as would be any counter-model too, since there is so little surviving literature that dates from before the end of the first century BCE. More problematically, however, this model buys into the image of an idealised and rather monolithic past which the Roman sources themselves offer us, but which we should be wary of taking at face value. Indeed, this tendency to simplify the past is a perennial issue that arises in studies of both ancient and post-classical periods. In the latter, the whole of ancient Rome is often characterised as a time of undifferentiated and idealised exemplary functionality, which is presented as the foil for the sophisticated critique of later periods (especially the Renaissance or the Enlightenment). Just as classical scholars tend to see the particular work of literature which is the focus of their own research as offering a sophisticated challenge to a previous simplistic exemplarity that preceded it, no matter when their author is writing, so scholars of post-classical authors – whether they study Chaucer, Boccaccio, Montaigne or Derrida – tend to see their own subject or era as experiencing a 'crisis of exemplarity', which marks the origins of a critical and distancing stance towards classical exempla.²⁶

²⁴ Pasco-Pranger 2015: 316. ²⁵ Blösel 2000: 54.

²⁶ Examples of this tendency can be found in e.g. Stierle 1970, Lyons 1989, Hampton 1990, Rigolot 1998, Stierle 1998 and Burke 2011.

Taking an overview of sources from different eras – as this book does – enables one to take a wider perspective from where it is clear that this idea that there was a single ‘crisis of exemplarity’, whether in the late Republic, the first century CE, the early modern period or the Enlightenment, is misguided. In fact, the ideas of crisis and failure within the practice of exemplarity, of dislocation between past and present, and anxiety about the relevance of exempla are all inherent features of exemplarity itself, consistently expressed in our ancient Roman sources.

To counter Walter’s suggestion that exempla became newly and uncomfortably ambiguous in the late Republic, I suggest that indeterminacy of meaning and the controversial thinking that it facilitates must have always been a feature of these exemplary narratives, since it was what made them ethically powerful.²⁷ It is unlikely that ethical ambiguity first emerged as a result of social disintegration; exempla were almost certainly ethically controversial and engaging from the start, and always understood differently from different social perspectives. Certainly, whenever scholars turn their attention to such literature as survives from before the late Republic, controversiality can be found. In her recent study, Nora Goldschmidt has discussed the exemplary material and motifs that are deployed in the extant passages of Ennius, primarily in the context of their influence on Virgil’s *Aeneid*. She argues that there is already ethical complexity to be found in Ennius’ work, similar to that which we find in later authors, and the exempla are represented as possessing ‘embedded difficulties’.²⁸ In other words, Goldschmidt identifies aspects of controversial thinking in this work of the second century BCE, at precisely the point which other scholars would cast as the heyday of aristocratic shaping of exempla as a form of self-promotion. Ennius was of course closely associated with the family of the Scipiones, and there is no doubt that he celebrates the achievements of certain families above others; yet Goldschmidt’s analysis supports my contention that behind this promotion of great men lay a complex and engaging ethics that sustained this socio-political deployment of exemplary motifs.

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Most scholars currently agree that something significant happened in the first century CE that affected – negatively – Roman exempla and their

²⁷ As we have already seen in [Chapter 7](#) on indeterminacy; see also [Chapters 12 and 13](#) on ‘controversiality’ as a fundamental feature of exempla.

²⁸ Goldschmidt 2013: 160. Certainly the complexity of the exemplum of Fabius Maximus Cunctator is neatly summarised in a handful of lines, as we will see in the following chapter.

cultural function. Several studies trace a similar narrative arc, describing an exemplary system that flourished in the late Republic but became stale and lifeless over the first century CE. They differ in what they identify as the crucial factor and what they believe its effect to have been. Not everyone is as extreme as Clara Berrendonner, who identifies Seneca as the culprit who has ‘assassinated’ exempla (Berrendonner 2000: 109), but by and large scholars do posit a deterioration over the first century from a vibrant cultural phenomenon to something much less appealing: dead, inert, ‘ossified’, ‘fossilised’, ‘lapidary’. Some blame Valerius Maximus with his codification of virtue, fixing the meaning of exemplary stories within his rubric structure, others blame Augustus with his imperial appropriation of the tradition, which meant that it was no longer possible for anyone except the emperor to be exemplary, or the dramatic political change that resulted in a rupture with the Republican past rendering it less relevant to the lives of those living under imperial rule, or Seneca with his move away from traditional republican morality to an internalised Stoic philosophy; these are identified as the key villains of this tale.²⁹ I shall summarise the various explanations of deterioration given by some leading scholars and then explain my own resistance to these narratives. I propose that it can be more helpful to think instead of these aspects of first-century exemplarity as enduring trends and tensions within the exemplary terrain.

Uwe Walter himself describes this change in terms of the fragmentation of a system of aristocratic commemoration, and dismantling of a complex functioning structure into handy individual components useful for education, which also entailed a process of intellectual diminution.³⁰ A similar story is told by Jane Chaplin in [chapter 6](#) of *Livy’s Exemplary History*: ‘While Cicero recycles and reinterprets his exempla to fit the context, the early imperial authors regard each exemplum’s meaning as fixed.’³¹ Christina Kraus, too, writes of ‘collections of disembodied exempla, such as those of Nepos, Atticus, and Varro (in their *Imagines*), Valerius Maximus, and Frontinus’, which deprive exempla of their wider narrative context and the moral grounding it confers, and render them vulnerable to losing their meaning.³² In these arguments, Valerius Maximus *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* makes an appearance, either as indication of, or contributor to, the new ‘ossification’ or ‘fragmentation’ of exempla. Perhaps

²⁹ In addition to Walter 2004: 408–426, see Litchfield 1914: 62–63, Chaplin 2000: 171 ‘fossilisation’, 172 ‘ossified’ and 179–202; Coudry and Späth 2001; Roller 2001; Kraus 2005; Gowing 2005; Brenk 2008: 242; Lobur 2008: 177 ‘fixed’, ‘solidified’; Wiseman 2014, and the response by Hölkeskamp 2014, and also Flower’s article in the same volume, Flower 2014b.

³⁰ Walter 2004: 426. ³¹ Chaplin 2000: 170. ³² Kraus 2005: 197–198.

inevitably as someone who takes Valerius Maximus' work as her starting point for work on *exempla*, I have always resisted such narratives – my resistance already finds its way into a footnote in Jane Chaplin's 2000 book on Livy.³³ It is clear to me – as I have discussed in Chapter 7, for example – that Valerius Maximus does not treat *exempla* as if their meanings are fixed any more than Cicero does, and that *exempla* continue to play an important ethical role in literature from later in the imperial period as well.³⁴

Valerius' organisation of rubrics, while it does not necessarily fix the meaning of the *exempla* or sap their ethical energy, certainly reflects a recognisable trend of the early Julio-Claudian period in which he was writing: that of the codification of ethics in the early empire and a related intensification in the practice of gathering, recording and organising knowledge. This trend affected the organisation of *exempla* in literature, and had already stimulated the publication of several collections of *exempla* before Valerius Maximus' work.³⁵ However, even the rubrics of Valerius' work appear less like a form of codification when one looks past the chapters that are labelled with simple virtues and vices to some of the less easily categorisable subjects, such as 'miracles' (1.8), the power and limitations of art (8.11), change of character or fortune (6.9) or 'wills that were rescinded' (7.7) and 'wills that remained valid even though they could have been rescinded' (7.8). The *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* is a more exuberant work than is usually recognised, crammed with all kinds of material that eludes systematic categorisation and is often internally inconsistent and open-ended. Valerius' work clearly acknowledges the flexibility of *exempla* and interacts with earlier texts in a way that indicates he sees himself as participating in a living tradition of interpretation and re-interpretation. As we have seen, Valerius' work also appears to introduce new philosophical motifs and new modes of handling particular exemplary tales that are taken up by later authors, such as Seneca and Silius Italicus, and to make a contribution to a flourishing tradition.

Meanwhile, one important line of argument in the scholarship is that the radical shift in political structures meant that *exempla* of the Republican era lost their relevance for those living under the new system of the principate. The first century entailed a break with the Republican

³³ Chaplin 2000: 171, n. 13. ³⁴ See also Langlands 2014a and 2014b on the later first century.

³⁵ Chaplin 2000: 169–170 for examples of the genre such as Cornelius Nepos' *Exempla* and Varro's *Imagines*. On new approaches to the organisation of knowledge in this period, see König and Whitmarsh 2007; Wallace-Hadrill 2008. On the significance of miscellaneity, see Morgan 2007b, Fitzgerald 2016; for some preliminary thoughts about its relevance to exemplary ethics, see Langlands 2015 and Chapter 5.

past, which inevitably created a distance between the present and past that some scholars have suggested posed problems for the smooth operation of exempla. As Jane Chaplin puts it in the final footnote of her book, Valerius Maximus ‘faced an unusual challenge in compiling historical exempla for an age that was manifestly different from its past; it was not immediately obvious how republican examples could have meaning under a completely new political system or how the emperors could be seen as a natural extension of republican government.’³⁶ This seismic shift in the significance of Republican history within Roman cultural memory over the course of the first century has been traced by Alain Gowing. However, this rupture does not necessarily entail the end of the republican exemplum: Gowing does not argue that exempla themselves lose their relevance in this period, but rather that the concept of the Republic as a political system gradually becomes obsolete. As we shall see, many Republican exempla continue to resonate throughout this century, but their ethical significance transmutes along with changing times.

Yet Livy’s own work already explores how the power and significance of exempla has always changed over time, as Chaplin has shown in her insightful analysis. For Livy does not merely retell exemplary stories, he also systematically depicts exemplary ethics in action in his work, showing the characters within his history constantly reinterpreting and redeploying exempla in a variety of settings in their speeches and decision-making. Chaplin points out that traditional exempla like that of Mucius, although they are evoked so memorably in the early books of Livy’s *History*, are rarely cited later on as models for later historical figures in the work. As we move through the work and through history, figures tend to turn instead to exempla closer to their own day. So while Corvinus in Book 7 is represented as imitating the Torquatus of Book 2 (as we saw in [Chapter 1](#)), when we reach the second century of Fabius Maximus and Scipio in Book 28, it is Regulus (a figure from the previous generation whose story would have been told in the lost Book 18) whose exemplum they deploy in their debates, as we shall see in the [following chapter](#). Throughout his work Livy reinforces the claim in his preface that history is useful in providing *documenta* (‘lessons’), but makes it clear that the usefulness of particular exempla is not absolute, and changes over time, and that their meaning and value is not fixed. In Livy’s continuously shifting narrative, the significance of individual exempla undergoes continual change as the years pass and as new interpreters step up to make sense of them. At the same time, Livy’s

³⁶ Chaplin 2000: 202, n. 17.

own inclusion of the earlier material and its strongly exemplary portrayal serves to undermine any attempt to claim that the older material has lost its relevance entirely. Indeed, we see that in some contexts older material carries more weight than recent. In addition, although earlier stories may not be directly cited in the later books, they continue to resonate as embedded cultural tropes and scenarios that shape the representation and interpretation of later events. This also holds true for Roman culture more broadly. In the case of Mucius, for instance, the first century sees many brief references to the story that attest to its being well-known and instantly evocative; however, in addition, the story itself becomes a trope that continues to be drawn upon and alluded to, often without explicit acknowledgement, in later depictions. For instance it is echoed in Lucan's representation of Scaeva in his *Bellum Civile*, in Pliny the Elder's depiction of the one-armed hero Sergius, and in the medieval aetiology for Marcus Aurelius' statue.³⁷

Andrew Feldherr has suggested that Livy, writing his monumental history of Rome at the end of the first century BCE just as Augustus was establishing his principate, was engaged in a new process of 'nationalising' exemplary stories. In his analysis of Livy's tales of single combat he writes: 'The innovation of Livy is not to have wrested duelling itself away from the surviving *nobiles* as a means of personal advancement, but, like Augustus in his Forum, to have taken control of the stories told about these events, converting them from self-glorifying family narratives to paradigms of patriotic action that had broader, national application.'³⁸ As this quotation shows, Feldherr views this innovation as part of a wider cultural trend of the late Republic and early empire whereby exemplary stories and figures that had hitherto been celebrated separately, as part of the family histories of particular aristocratic families, are brought together – physically in the case of the statues in the forum of Augustus – to represent a general Roman heroic history. Within this new Roman historical framework, family heroes become national heroes who are available as exempla for all Romans, and not only to their own descendants. In Feldherr's representation, there is a clear association made with the new imperial regime

³⁷ On Scaeva in Lucan and the links to the exempla tradition, see Leigh 1997: 158–190; on Pliny the Elder's casting of Sergius as an exemplum in the Mucius mould, see Beagon 2002; on the statue in the *Mirabilia*, see Chapter 9. Much later attestations to the grip this tale maintained on the imagination include the story in Bernini about St. Lawrence testing his own pain and comparing himself (favourably) with Mucius, and Nietzsche testing the realism of the Mucius story by picking up a burning ember in his hand (as recorded in Albert Camus' notebooks).

³⁸ Feldherr 1998: 97.

inaugurated by Augustus, and with his appropriation of the past so as to bring all of Roman history and exemplary virtues into the service of imperial self-promotion. The construction of the public gallery of statues in the Forum of Augustus, with their accompanying inscriptions and *elogia*, is often identified as a key moment in the history of the exemplary tradition, either inspiring or at least closely associated with many literary works: the parade of heroes in Virgil *Aeneid* Book 6 and of course the work of Valerius Maximus, but also passages in Manilius' *Astronomica*.

However, such emphasis that these figures belong to the community at large rather than to specific noble families was not necessarily a new trend of the Augustan era. As we have seen, it is already part of the rise of the 'new man' in the previous decades. In the late republic, several writers – including Cato the Elder (as we have already seen), Cicero and Sallust – are concerned to make the argument explicit that virtue is not the domain only of those *nobiles* who count illustrious exempla among their direct ancestors, and that such exempla can be claimed and imitated by *novi homines*, as well.³⁹ In his speech in defence of Sestius in 56 BCE, Cicero makes a clear distinction between the noble youths who have their own family ancestors to imitate, and the youths who do not have noble ancestry, but rely on their own talents, who can take the whole sweep of Roman heroes as their own: 'You, who are young, and noble by birth, I will encourage to imitate the example of your ancestors; those of you who are capable of achieving nobility through your talent and virtue, I will urge to follow that career in which many "new men" have flourished with honour and glory' (*vosque, adulescentes, et qui nobiles estis, ad maiorum vestrorum imitationem excitabo, et qui ingenio ac virtute nobilitatem potestis consequi, ad eam rationem, in qua multi homines novi et honore et gloria floruerunt, cohortabor*, Cic. *Sest.* 136–137). He urges the latter group: 'Therefore let us imitate our own Brutus, Camillus, Ahala, Decius, Curius, Fabricius, Maximus, Scipio, Lentulus, Aemilius and many others who have established this state' (*quare imitemur nostros Brutos, Camillos, Ahalas, Decios, Curios, Fabricios, Maximos, Scipiones, Lentulos, Aemilios, innumerabiles alios, qui hanc rem publicam stabiliverunt*, Cic. *Sest.* 143). Some of the central sites of exemplarity, such as those surrounding the figures of Fabricius and Curius and their resistance to bribery and corruption, may have emerged from

³⁹ See e.g. Cic. *Sest.* 101–102, 143, where Cicero urges his non-aristocratic audience members to take national heroes as their models, *Verr.* 2.4.81 where he says that Scipio Africanus Aemilianus ought to be entrusted to the whole community and not to a single family. On *novitas* and exempla in Cicero and Cato, see Blom 2010: 151–174. On Sallust, see especially the speech of Marius at *Jug.* 85 with Comber and Balmaceda 2009.

precisely this strand of exemplary ethics which celebrates the emergence of virtue and heroism in new families where there is no previous history of it.⁴⁰ Thus any 'nationalisation' of exempla by Augustus must be seen as part of a long-standing contest over the ownership of exemplary ancestors with its roots deep in the Republic.

Of course, the most dramatic transformation over this period is the political transition from republic to principate and its social and cultural consequences, which no doubt had an impact on exempla and on their deployment. Augustus' appropriation of traditional exempla in the service of promotion of his new imperial regime is but the first step in a transformation of the exemplary terrain, in which traditional heroes take on imperial virtues.⁴¹ In his own writings and in the monuments he commissioned, Augustus represented himself as a leader who is reinvigorating the practice of emulating past exempla, but is also simultaneously offering himself and his own family members as new exempla for the future: 'I myself handed down to posterity exempla of many things to be imitated' (*ipse multarum rerum exempla imitandi posteris tradidi*, Augustus, *Res Gestae* 8.5).⁴²

Berrendonner has seen it as significant that the period within which exempla flourished (that is, in her view, the mid-Republic until the middle of the first century CE) coincides with the period between the birth and death of the senatorial system.⁴³ She suggests that Seneca is giving voice to a particular senatorial group within Roman society, and that it is this that results in the transition from civic virtue to personal virtue (as observed in the [previous chapter](#) in relation to Mucius' site of exemplarity). She sees this shift as part of the senatorial response to the political changes that stripped them of their political power in the first century. The growth of Stoicism's popularity, and the concomitant desire for a moral framework and form of personal validation that does not rely on external recognition, may reflect this aspect of social change: the senatorial class had diminished opportunity for civic and military honour under the emperor. However, although the emphasis on the personal, individual and internalised ethics is undoubtedly heightened in the second half of the first century, as we have

⁴⁰ On the tradition surrounding the figures of Fabricius and Curius and its association with 'new men', see Berrendonner 2001, Mencacci 2001; on *novi homines* as exempla, see Blom 2010: 158–165.

⁴¹ Speaking specifically of the exempla of Fabricius and Curius, Berrendonner notes: 'Leur intégration parmi les grands hommes du Forum d'Auguste indique que dans la politique de Princes, ils se virent assigner la fonction de représenter partie des vertues imperiales qui apparaissaient sur le fameux bouclier d'Auguste' (Berrendonner 2001: 107).

⁴² See Kraus 2005: 194–195; Langlands 2015a; Gunderson 2015. ⁴³ Berrendonner 2001: 109.

seen, it is not entirely new. Our archetypal exemplary tales of [Chapter 1](#) entail internal personal struggles formulated within the context of civic virtue and civic honour, but also simultaneously in conflict with them. In fact, it is the friction that is caused by the proximity of different ethical impulses that make these into exciting and engaging stories.

In an excellent article, Christina Kraus further explores the possibility of a breakdown of exemplarity resulting from what she describes as ‘the claustrophobic presence of the emperor’,⁴⁴ which draws all eyes towards him and makes it more difficult to celebrate a range of exemplary heroes. She argues that ‘when history’s gaze is more or less forcibly directed at the emperor – especially (but not exclusively) to the emperor functioning as positive role model – the prescriptive function of *exempla* becomes dominant. The flexibility inherent in the *exemplum* being thus threatened or even lost, the audience’s independent response to the spectacular suggestiveness of exemplarity is repressed or redirected, and its constructive use profoundly compromised.’⁴⁵ She shows how in the autobiographical works of Julius Caesar’s *Commentarii* and Augustus’ *Res Gestae* ‘the republican model of the ideal general in a sequence (and partnership) shifts, apparently inevitably, toward a new model of a single leader’,⁴⁶ and suggests that ‘as history narrows to the person of the Caesar, the possibilities for exemplarity narrow as well’.⁴⁷

A pleasing illustration of such an effect of imperial rule on exemplary ethics is found in the opening poem of the first book of Statius’ *Silvae* (occasional poems mostly addressed to patrons), which celebrates the unveiling of a gigantic equestrian statue of the emperor Domitian in the Roman forum.⁴⁸ In this poem, which imagines a dedication ceremony in the forum, and is probably written for the actual occasion of the statue’s dedication in about 90 CE, our venerable hero Curtius of the chasm (see [Chapter 1](#)) is invoked and called up from his lake in the Roman forum where he is imagined to dwell, and brought face to face with a new kind of hero – the emperor Domitian – in order that the exemplary hero can both endorse the emperor’s heroic status and cede to his greatness. This poem is a work of imperial panegyric, deploying the motif of exemplarity as a means of articulating imperial power, as the emperor is celebrated using the age-old exemplary motifs. The equestrian statue is recognisable

⁴⁴ Kraus 2005: 182. ⁴⁵ Kraus 2005: 188. ⁴⁶ Kraus 2005: 189.

⁴⁷ Kraus 2005: 186. Cf. Berrendonner 2001: 107: ‘L’empereur synthétisait ainsi les vertues dispersés des grands hommes de la republique, il était désormais le seul grand homme possible’; see also Morello 2018.

⁴⁸ Stat. *Silv.* 1.1.

as a traditional republican reward for and commemoration of heroic deeds, and this medium of celebration in itself evokes exemplarity (cf. the case of the equestrian statue of Cloelia, Pliny *NH* 34. 28–29) and clearly draws a comparison between Domitian and previous holders of that honour.⁴⁹ However, when, at the centre of the poem, after a description of the new imperial statue and its magnificence, Statius makes an expanded reference to the exemplary deed of Curtius, he reflects on how the value and significance of Curtius' deed has changed now that it is being viewed from the perspective of a society under imperial rule.⁵⁰

In the course of extolling the wonders of this new imperial monument, Statius evokes the ghost of Curtius himself as 'guardian of the site to whom the pool is sacred', *ipse loci custos, cuius sacrata vorago*, the hero of old, rising up from the Curtian pool to gaze in amazement at this newcomer to this location which has long been associated with his own name and heroism.⁵¹

The guardian of the place himself, whose name the sacred chasm and the famous lakes preserve as memorable, as he hears the countless clashes of bronze and the Forum groaning with the rude blows, lifts up his shaggy face from the sacred mud, his head honoured with well-deserved oak-wreaths. At first he was afraid of the vast apparition and the flashing lights of the mightier steed; three times his proud neck plunged trembling into the pool.

ipse loci custos, cuius sacrata vorago
famosique lacus nomen memorabile servant,
innumeros aeris sonitus et verbera crudo
ut sensit mugire forum, movet horrida sancto
ora situ meritaque caput venerabile quercu.
ac primum ingentes habitus lucemque coruscam
expavit maioris equi terque ardua mersit
colla lacu trepidans

(Stat. *Silv.* 1.1.66–73).

⁴⁹ Earlier in Statius' poem, the exempla with which Domitian is compared are all Greek mythological exempla (lines 8–21) *num age fama prior notum per saecula nomen Dardanii miretur equi*. In lines 52–53, Adrastus' Arion and Castor's Cyllaris are also mythological comparanda. At lines 21–31, however, there is an extended comparison with Caesar (Caesar *mitior armis, te signa ferente*), rewriting the old exemplum and ancient history with that idea that Cato would have submitted; on the significance of these comparisons, see Cordes 2014, Morello 2018.

⁵⁰ On this kind of critical reflection on exemplarity under the principate, see Morello 2018, exploring in particular the use of the counterfactual in articulating social, political and cultural change under the principate in relation to exemplarity and cf. Cordes 2014: 308–320 on exempla and the counterfactual in Martial and panegyric.

⁵¹ For further discussion of this poem, see Geyssen 1996; Coleman 1999: 68–69; Newlands 2002: 60–62 (despite the fact that she calls him 'Mettius Curtius', she reads the reference as being to our Curtius rather than to the Sabine warrior who escaped drowning in a swamp in the time of Romulus); Cordes 2014: 298–307.

Once he has overcome his initial fear and recognised the figure of the emperor, Curtius joyfully welcomes Domitian to the locality as a divine being:

Then, delighted at the sight of a guardian (*praeside*) he said: ‘Welcome, offspring and forebear of mighty gods, I have been hearing of your divine powers from afar. Now my swamp is fortunate, now it will be venerated, since I have been allowed get to know your immortal splendour at close quarters and to watch over the nearby dwelling-place.’

... laetus mox praeside viso:
 ‘salve, magnorum proles genitorque deorum,
 auditum longe numen mihi! nunc mea felix,
 nunc veneranda palus, cum te prope nosse tuumque
 immortale iubar vicina sede tueri
 concessum’ (Stat. *Silv.* 1.1.73–78).

Having uttered the rather jarring claim that it is only with the arrival of Domitian that this hallowed location becomes *felix* and *veneranda*,⁵² Curtius then goes on to draw a comparison between his own archetypal exemplary heroism and the multiple achievements of the emperor. His own is merely a single deed, over very quickly; the emperor, on the other hand, has a whole string of achievements to his name, and the duration of the imperial heroism is far longer lasting:

‘Only one time was I the author and contriver of saving the Roman people; you, in drawn out battle, have mastered the wars of Jupiter, the battles of the Rhine, civil crime, the mountain that was slow to make a treaty.’

‘semel auctor ego inventorque salutis
 Romuleae: tu bella Iovis, tu proelia Rheni,
 tu civile nefas, tu tardum in foedera montem
 longo Marte domas’ (Stat. *Silv.* 1.1.78–81).

Finally, inevitably, the ancient hero cedes to the mighty emperor and makes it clear: had Domitian been alive in Curtius’ day, Curtius would not have dared to step forward and identify *himself* as the epitome and representative of the cream of Roman manhood.⁵³

⁵² Compare for instance Suetonius on the idea that in the Augustan period people gathered every year to throw coins in the pool (Suet. *Aug.* 57.1; cf. Ov. *Fast.* 4.403–404, Cordes 2014: 302).

⁵³ His description of a ghostly encounter between this emperor and the long-dead hero thus also offers an exploration of the key exemplary tensions identified in Chapter 1 between the hero’s boldness and his modesty, between his exceptionality and his commitment to the community.

‘If my own era had borne you, it would have been you who attempted (*temptasses*) to plunge into the deep lake, while I would not have dared to. But Rome would have held onto your reins . . . ’

‘ . . . quod si te nostra tulissent
saecula, temptasses me non audente profundo
ire lacu, sed Roma tuas tenuisset habenas’ (Stat. *Silv.* 1.1.81–83).⁵⁴

That role of stepping forward to take the nation’s fate upon his shoulders would naturally have fallen to Domitian, had he been present, and no other man would have dared to compete with him for it. While in Valerius Maximus’ rendition Curtius’ deed has never been surpassed, and the implication is that it may never be,⁵⁵ sixty years on the situation is represented by Statius as somewhat different: now the imperial leader easily outshines these ancient paragons. Statius’ somewhat convoluted tribute to the emperor also serves, in its interplay between legendary past and imperial present, to show how much has changed since those days of old. Certainly, in this context of imperial panegyric, which has been conditioned by the political structures of the principate, two things are represented as different. First, it is now possible to surpass traditional heroes. The virtuous tyranny of the exemplary past is overturned; Curtius’ ghost is intimidated and awestruck by this ‘greater horse’. Second, it is no longer possible for anyone outside the imperial circle to be the pre-eminent hero of the moment. Curtius could not have stepped forward and identified himself as preeminent in the company of Domitian.⁵⁶ However, if the emperor seems at first to replace the hero, Statius makes it clear that the emperor himself cannot become the traditional Republican hero either. Curtius’ speech ends with the image of Domitian held back from the fatal leap (*Roma tuas tenuisset habenas*, 83). If Domitian had stepped forward instead of Curtius, intending to hurl himself into the chasm, the crowd would not have allowed him to jump, but would have intervened to hold him back from the edge of the precipice. So precious an asset is this particular member of the community in the context of a monarchy that he cannot be spared at all. Self-sacrifice is no longer what is required of a hero; the emperor is a different kind of leader and hero, and he needs to survive. Thus the perspective of imperial

⁵⁴ On Curtius as an exemplary comparison to Domitian, see Cordes 2014: 302–307, bringing out the political implications of the comparison between the republican and imperial figures.

⁵⁵ Val. Max. 5.6.2, see Chapter 1.

⁵⁶ See Cordes 2014: 304 on the difficulty of translating *me non audente* in line 82; my interpretation is similar to hers (and differs from e.g. Geysen 1996), although I have not gone so far as to translate it as a causal phrase – ‘because I would not have dared to venture’ – as she does.

panegyric first rewrites the traditional exemplum in a counter-historical fashion, and then destroys the original without, it turns out, needing to replace it, so different is the world of imperial power.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that this poem and others writing in the same panegyric vein are not necessarily evidence of a wholesale change in attitude towards exempla; it is merely that panegyric elaborates some of the particular possibilities of exempla in relation to the increasingly important genre of imperial praise. Yes, Pliny does claim in his *Panegyricus* that Trajan has no exemplary precedent ('without model, without exemplum he competes with himself', *sine aemulo, sino exemplo secum certare*, Plin. *Pan.* 13.5), but this is imperial rhetoric. On a broader social scale, how far does the emperor really eclipse the heroes of old and edge other moral agents out of the picture?⁵⁷ After all, Valerius Maximus was writing under an emperor too, Tiberius, and he writes with full acknowledgement of Augustus' engagement with exemplarity (e.g. 6.1. pr.). Suetonius makes it clear that the attempts of emperors to appropriate the role of the exemplary were by no means always successful.⁵⁸ Moreover Kraus ends her article by pointing out that Tacitus' historical works, produced at the end of the first century, are still full of exempla, and she suggests that, after all, there may have been 'no successful imposition of a monolithic imperial image'.⁵⁹ What we may be seeing at the end of the first century in the works of authors such as Tacitus, Suetonius, Quintilian, Pliny, Statius and Martial is a newly invigorated form of exemplary ethics that positions itself explicitly in relation to the dark days of the preceding decades of imperial rule, which posed all kinds of challenges for exemplary ethics.⁶⁰

Authors of the late first century, such as Pliny and Tacitus, write explicitly about a rupture in the 'chain of exemplarity' (as Gazich has put it)⁶¹ that was inflicted during a period of repression of memory and enforced silence during the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE). As Tacitus describes it in his *Agricola*, this was a period when it was dangerous to praise those who should have been commemorated as *exempla virtutis*. Praising the Stoic heroes Thrasea and Helvidius was a capital offence (*legimus . . . capitale fuisse*, Tac. *Agric.* 2). What had really dealt a blow to the exemplary system, according to these writers who had survived this era, was that, in

⁵⁷ For a similar reservation about the representation of the relation between past and present in imperial panegyric, see Cordes 2014: 307.

⁵⁸ See the e.g. discussion of Langlands 2015b on Augustus as exemplum, and Gunderson 2015 on Tiberius, and Lowrie 2007 on the difficulty of controlling one's own exemplary legacy.

⁵⁹ Kraus 2005: 199–200. ⁶⁰ Langlands 2014a. ⁶¹ Gazich 2003.

addition, during this period people had also been constrained to praise those who did not deserve it at all. Pliny expresses his outrage at this and his anxieties about its effect in two letters to Montanus (*Epp.* 7.29 and 8. 6). These describe his response to an inscription in honour of Pallas – the notorious freedman who was so powerful in the reign of Claudius – which Pliny has recently stumbled across on the Tiburtine road, just outside Rome. Pliny writes in disgust:

I have never been very impressed by those honours (*ornamenta*) which are often obtained through luck rather than through judgment; this inscription really brought home to me just how farcical and absurd they are; when every now and then they are thrown away on this kind of dirt and filth, and when this low-life has dared to accept them and even to refuse them, and even to set himself up as an exemplum of moderation for future generations . . .

equidem numquam sum miratus quae saepius a fortuna quam a iudicio proficiscerentur; maxime tamen hic me titulus admonuit, quam essent mimica et inepta, quae interdum in hoc caenum, in has sordes abicerentur, quae denique ille furcifer et recipere ausus est et recusare, atque etiam ut moderationis exemplum posteris prodere (*Ep.* 7.29.3).

What Pliny finds particularly upsetting is the idea that Pallas is being held up for posterity as an exemplum of the virtue of moderation (*exemplum moderationis*) and he is particularly anxious that a public display of this false exemplum may be misleading future generations. In letter 8.6, having looked up the actual decree passed by the senate, he cites its precise wording: ‘so that others may be inspired by the example of Pallas and its rewards to rival him’, *ut exemplo Pallantis praemiorum ad studium aemulationis ceteri provocarentur*, describing it sarcastically as a ‘splendid reason’ (*egregiam rationem*) for the decree, which the senators were not ashamed to offer (8.6.15). In this second letter he complains about how excessive the praise lavished upon Pallas in the senatorial decree is, making a strong contrast with that attracted by the deserving traditional exempla: ‘Bring them all together and mix them into one – I don’t just mean those ancient heroes, like Scipio Africanus, L. Mummius Achaicus or Scipio Aemilianus, but the more recent ones such as Marius, Sulla and Pompey (I won’t go on); the praise of Pallas exceeds them’, *conferant se misceantque, non dico illi veteres, Africani Achaici Numantini, sed hi proximi Marii Sullae Pompei (nolo progredi longius): infra Pallantis laudes iacebunt* (*Ep.* 8.6.2). Such is the perversion of exemplarity in this period.

As his quotation from it shows, the original senatorial decree did indeed express the hope that this public honour would have an exemplary impact on future generations:

‘Inasmuch as it is expedient that the Emperor’s generous promptitude to praise and reward merit should everywhere be published and particularly in places where those entrusted with the administration of his affairs may be encouraged to follow the example set them, and where the example of Pallas’s proved loyalty and integrity may inspire others to honourable rivalry, it is resolved that the statement made by the noble Emperor before this distinguished House on 23 January, together with the resolutions passed by the Senate concerning this matter, shall be engraved on a bronze tablet and that tablet shall be affixed to the mailed statue of the deified Julius Caesar.’

‘utique, cum sit utile principis benignitatem promptissimam ad laudem praemiaque merentium illustrari ubique et maxime iis locis, quibus incitari ad imitationem praepositi rerum eius curae possent, et Pallantis spectatissima fides atque innocentia exemplo provocare studium tam honestae aemulationis posset, ea quae X. kal. Februarias quae proximae fuissent in amplissimo ordine optimus princeps recitasset senatusque consulta de iis rebus facta in aere inciderentur, idque aes figeretur ad statuam loricatam divi Iulii’ (Plin. *Ep.* 8.6.13, translation from the Loeb).

The inscription is packed with the vocabulary of Roman exemplary ethics, applied to the practicalities of imperial politics: *illustrari, incitari ad imitationem, spectatissima, exemplo, aemulationis*.

There is complex exemplarity at work here. The emperor Claudius models good leadership for his agents elsewhere throughout the empire, provincial governors and other magistrates. He models the reward and celebration of virtue so that such cultures of leadership can promote cultures of excellences and spur others on. Meanwhile Pallas, the recipient of the imperial reward here, like an archetypal exemplum, shows the reward that virtue can bring, and also provides a model of virtue in himself, as an inspirational figure. Exemplarity was indeed subject to imperial appropriation: just as in previous generations the Senate had rewarded citizens who devoted themselves to the wellbeing of Rome, so the princeps now takes on that official role, allegedly in collaboration with the Senate. The fact that the inscription is set up on the statue of deified Julius Caesar cuts both ways in terms of tradition and innovation. On the one hand, the connection with Julius Caesar positions Pallas’ exemplarity in a historical tradition that traces back to the republic; on the other hand, by choosing a figure who is both proto-imperial and deified, this choice of location

emphasises the fact that emperors are of a different order from ordinary mortals, and stand apart from the rest of humanity – as we saw with Statius' Domitian and is also the case with the treatment of Julius Caesar and Augustus by Valerius Maximus.

This decree and the inscription provide evidence that the process of official rewards for exemplary behaviour was very much in operation in the imperial period, although it did not always fit easily with the structures of exemplary ethics. Yet Pliny's discussion of the inscription frames it as a perversion of morality in its failure to reward genuine virtue and its promotion of the undeserving to exemplary status. Both Tacitus and Pliny write of the recent revival of exemplarity in the post-Domitianic era when at last it has become possible to praise and honour good deeds again ('now, at last, the spirit returns', *nunc demum redit animus*, Tac. *Agric.* 3). Indeed, this, in part, is the project of both Pliny's *Letters* and Tacitus' biography of *Agricola*. Tacitus' *Agricola* (published in about 98 CE) opens by expressing its aim 'to hand down to posterity the deeds and behaviour of famous men' (*clarorum virorum facta moresque posteris tradere*, Tac. *Agric.* 1.1). Pliny's letters are full of commemoration of exemplary figures of his own day, and he represents himself as having a role to play in righting the wrongs of previous eras, for instance through his public praise of Titinius Capito's new statue in honour of Lucius Silanus, who had been executed by Nero in 65 CE (*Ep.* 1.17; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 16.7–9). Pliny's letters systematically recuperate the glory and fame of those who were suppressed or killed in previous decades of the principate, according honour where it is due.⁶² The praise of the deserved serves to counteract the unmerited reward of men such as Pallas earlier in the century.

Rather than celebrate the archetypal republican exempla, Pliny's letters depict a living exemplary tradition, where personal connections and individual memories are the first step in creating exempla that can be more widely disseminated in the community. The elderly people who have lived through turbulent periods in the recent past, or who have spoken extensively to people who lived even further back, or remember vividly what they are like, are the living connections to the past. These are the people whom Pliny most often holds up in his letters as true *exempla virtutis*, not figures from the distant past but rather contemporaries who are still alive

⁶² On the exemplary project in Pliny's *Letters*, see Gazich 2003; Bernstein 2008; Bradley 2010; Gibson and Morello 2012, chapter 4, especially 115–123, 126–135; Langlands 2014. On the value of historical examples in Pliny, see *Epp.* 1.17.3–4, 1.22.2, 2.1.7, 7.33.9, 8.6.2, 8.12. Pliny's teacher was Quintilian, whose articulation of the idea that traditional Republican exempla are the foundation of an ethical education we have already seen (Quint. *Inst.* 12.2.29–30).

(or sometimes recently deceased), held up as virtuous role models in the round, and often characterised through lists of abstract virtues.⁶³ Pliny appears to be using his letters to create new, modern exempla who can take their place in the traditional exemplary canon and help to shape future generations in their turn, reconnecting the exemplary links in the chain that had been broken under Domitian's rule.

The idea of the immediacy of exempla, and the need for present, living role models, standing right in front of one, is one that runs through the whole corpus of Pliny's letters as a strong theme, and it is a new emphasis in the exemplary ethics that is characteristic of literature from this post-Domitianic era more generally.⁶⁴ In *Ep.* 8.14, Pliny famously writes about how senators of his generation have suffered because they did not have the living role models in front of them from which they could learn how to conduct their lives as senators and soldiers properly. It is all very well having the exemplary tales of the great men of old, but the implication in this passage is that you need to have real-life, living, individual role models in front of you in order to learn how to live, to shape your own life and behave in the best possible way so as to become an effective and virtuous person. Pliny writes of what he describes as the 'ancient institution' through which young men used to learn such things: 'There was an ancient institution, whereby we used to learn from our forebears not just by listening but also by watching, thus grasping what things should be done subsequently by ourselves and in turn be handed down to the next generations' *erat autem antiquitus institutum, ut a maioribus natu non auribus modo verum etiam oculis disceremus, quae facienda mox ipsi ac per vices quasdam tradenda minoribus haberemus*, *Ep.* 8.14.4). Youths would spend time in the military camps, learning how to become generals by watching the generals at work, and in the curia watching the political leaders.⁶⁵ Every skill that was needed in these occupations was 'learnt through (living) exempla' (*exemplis docebantur*).⁶⁶ Moreover, this letter also emphasises that if you have the wrong examples before you, the consequences can be dangerous. When young men of his generation were in the camps and the curia, they had before them leaders who lacked the virtue of *auctoritas* ('authority'), soldiers who lacked *verecundia* ('modesty'), and a situation where virtue was mistrusted. In such a situation, the exemplary effect was deleterious – they have ended up a generation of men 'whose characters are

⁶³ Langlands 2014.

⁶⁴ Cf. Suet. *Otho* 10.1–2 for Otho's inspiration by the exemplary suicide of a soldier enacted in front of him.

⁶⁵ *Ep.* 8.14.5–6. ⁶⁶ *Ep.* 8.14.6.

weakened, broken and bruised, with repercussions for the future too' (*quibus ingenia nostra in posterum quoque hebetata fracta contusa sunt*).⁶⁷

This emphasis on the need for present and living exempla is found throughout Latin literature, but attracts particular emphasis in this later period and beyond. Several authors of the late first century are engaged in building and disseminating new and up-to-date exempla drawn from their own acquaintance. In a study of exemplarity in Tacitus' works, Hunink has argued that even when his exempla are depicted as failing within the text, they may nevertheless serve as lessons outside the text for future readers: '[E]xempla can instruct even when they do not persuade' (Hunink 2004: 92). Tacitus' *Histories*, describing the events of 69 CE, begins by stating that despite the moral breakdown of the civil war moral exemplarity was still in operation. At the same time, the exempla that he lists are of a very different order from the traditional exemplary that have been our primary focus: 'The age was not so barren of virtue that it did not offer any exempla, including good ones. Mothers accompanied their children in flight, wives followed their husbands into exile: there were brave relatives, loyal sons-in-law, and loyalty of slaves that defied even torture; the last moments of great men were born bravely and their ends equalled the praiseworthy deaths of men of old' (*non tamen adeo virtutum sterile saeculum ut non et bona exempla prodiderit. comitatae profugos liberos matres, secutae maritos in exilia coniuges: propinqui audentes, constantes generi, contumax etiam adversus tormenta servorum fides; supremae clarorum virorum necessitates fortiter toleratae et laudatis antiquorum mortibus pares exitus*, Tac. *Hist.* 1.3.1). His exempla rival the heroes of antiquity, but his list begins with domestic examples of loyalty within families, and the small heroism shown by women and other humbler members of society in this period where political structures have broken down. Tacitus' *Agricola* and Pliny's *Letters* introduce women as important exemplary protagonists for the first time and reflect the increasing social diversity and range of exemplary protagonists we have already noted for the middle of the century.

In each case these new imperial exempla are shaped by the narrative structures and motifs of familiar stories of the Republican tradition, and also by emergent ideologies. Where Pliny, for instance, makes reference to traditional exempla (e.g. to Xerxes, Cato, Sertorius and Arria in Book 3 of his letters), he reinterprets them, as Nicole Méthy has argued, and subtly transforms them into exempla that reflect his own humanistic values of compassion, love, personal and family loyalty, friendship and

⁶⁷ *Ep.* 8.14.9.

freedom.⁶⁸ Likewise, Gazich has described Pliny's treatment of exempla as being 'filtered through a new humanist-literary sensibility'.⁶⁹ Nicole Méthy describes Pliny as developing in his letters a new ethic which privileges personal qualities over collective values, and the individual over society.⁷⁰ She argues that he values above all the quality of *humanitas*, where emotional experience and sensitivity are crucial qualities for a person to possess.⁷¹ In these writers of the later first century CE, then, we see clearly how the typical protagonist of an exemplum has correspondingly changed over the course of these centuries: where the archetypal Republican exempla were overwhelmingly male military and political leaders, they are now often the ordinary and even anonymous person, remaining brave and kind in the most difficult circumstances; loyalty and integrity emerge as the prized moral qualities of this age.

It is important to bear in mind the genres in which all these authors were writing; as always, the nature of the literature that survives from different periods affects our perception of each period. Different kinds of texts handle exempla differently, and when we trace diachronic change we need to ensure that we compare like with like. For instance, in terms of their approach to exempla and exemplary ethics Pliny's letters are not very different from Cicero's letters; the distance of both from Cicero's speeches and philosophical works is much greater. This suggests that it may be as much the epistolary genre that accounts for the emphasis in Pliny's letters on the personal and contemporary exempla as the era in which he is living. Likewise, it is perhaps not surprising that Tacitus includes many fewer references to Republican exempla in his historical works than does Livy given the different periods on which their works focus, but it does not mean he is any less interested in exemplary ethics or that the traditional exempla are not still an important part of Roman cultural memory when

⁶⁸ Méthy 2007: 220: 'Les deux figures [Arria and Xerxes] perdent une grande partie de leurs caractéristiques traditionnelles, au profit de l'indication, nouvelle, de leurs sentiments ... Qui cède à ses émotions peut devenir un modèle, c'est-à-dire incarner l'homme dans sa plénitude et sa vérité', and 'Car ils se trouvent, en même temps, subtilement et peut-être inconsciemment, sinon transformés, au moins pourvus d'une dimension nouvelle, à la fois plus singulière et plus humaine. Cet aspect les distingue des autres figures louées dans les lettres, appartenant, elles, à la réalité contemporaine. Pendant que celles-ci incarnent des valeurs traditionnelles, ils incarnent, paradoxalement, des valeurs nouvelles, en tout cas des valeurs pliniennes de compassion, d'amour et de liberté, auxquelles ils sont susceptibles d'apporter une sorte de caution. A travers eux et par eux, c'est la notion même d'exemplum qui se trouve, elle aussi, partiellement modifiée, certainement enrichie' (Méthy 2003: 214).

⁶⁹ Pliny's 'sistema di valori riferibile al mos maiorum, ma ora filtrato attraverso una nuova sensibilità umanistico-letteraria' (Gazich 2003: 137).

⁷⁰ Méthy 2003: 215. ⁷¹ Méthy 2007.

he is writing. In some genres, traditional Roman exempla are still very much in evidence well beyond the first century. In 95 CE, Quintilian is still claiming that exempla such as Fabricii, Curii, Reguli, Decii, Mucii are the best route to virtue; in 150s and 160s CE, Apuleius is still casually dropping traditional exempla into his rhetorical works in such a way as to suggest that they still have rhetorical purchase.⁷² In rhetoric then, exempla are still playing an important role. In other genres (letters, panegyric and other genres that deal with more recent events), the influence of exemplary ethics is more oblique; yet in the form of received scenarios and motifs drawn from exemplary ethics that structure understanding of the world and of the recent past, traditional exempla continue to be highly influential on Roman literature, even when they are not mentioned by name or directly discussed – perhaps *especially* when they are not directly discussed.

Although writers such as Pliny, Suetonius and Tacitus may only rarely allude to the traditional exempla directly, all the foremost writers of this period have exemplary ethics very much at the forefront of their thinking, and they engage indirectly with the exemplary terrain often as a means of communicating particular ideas about contemporary ethics.⁷³ Suetonius and Tacitus often cast recent events as modern exempla through allusion to traditional motifs and narratives, but without direct reference to those sites of exemplarity. For instance, the exemplum of Fabricius pops up as an implicit model for Tiberius in Tacitus *Annals* 2.88.⁷⁴ Republican exempla still exercise a grip on the moral and historical imagination, even when they are not explicitly cited.⁷⁵ We continue to see the emergence of new stories which may have less cultural status than those that have long been culturally embedded, and do not inhabit such rich sites of exemplarity themselves, yet are always engaging with the earlier and richer sites, and plugging into their existing dynamics.

Towards the end of the first century CE, then, imperial rhetoric disseminated the notion that the imperial court was the only possible source of exempla: the emperor, his family members and his close associates embodying true virtue. At the same time many Roman writers are suggesting that the traditional exemplary framework has been damaged and dismantled by a terrible previous era when true virtue was not rewarded, and when the virtuous cycle of exemplarity, where each generation learned from the previous, had been disrupted. Others are grumbling about the

⁷² E.g. Apuleius' citation of the exempla of Manius Curius and Cato the Elder in *Apologia* 17 with the discussion of Pasco-Pranger 2015: 317–319.

⁷³ Langlands 2014, Langlands 2018. ⁷⁴ Berrendonner 2001: 107.

⁷⁵ On an instance of this in Suetonius and Tacitus, see Langlands 2018.

hypocrisy of moralists who spout exempla, and complaining about the elite who pride themselves on their exemplary ancestors without bothering to cultivate their virtues.⁷⁶ These ways of conceptualising exemplarity as something that has been irrevocably altered by the new political structures of the Roman principate are important elements of how some Romans responded to the exemplary tradition during this period. Nevertheless, it is important not to take these ancient authors at face value, as scholars have been wont to do, and not to overstate the extent to which the exemplary framework went into decline and lost its cultural relevance in the period.⁷⁷

One line of scholarly argument goes that the first century CE was a period when exempla atrophied and lost their force through overuse, and that their meanings became fixed, resulting in a reduction in the scope of their significance. Two pieces of evidence offered for this are Seneca's explicit characterisation of exempla as clichéd, which we have already seen (Sen. *Ep.* 24.6, discussed in [Chapter 6](#)), and the fact that in the first century the nature of references to exempla seems to change, so that rather than the rich and lengthy narratives of Livy we find very brief references with little evocative detail.⁷⁸ Once again, however, I should like to offer alternative interpretations. While in this letter Seneca explicitly acknowledges the danger of overfamiliarity with the exempla that are learned *ad nauseam* in the rhetorical schools, he nevertheless succeeds, as we have seen, in breathing new life into these examples and finding them useful in high-level philosophical discussion in his own works. We have also seen that exempla had different roles to play across the course of an individual's life. Since exempla were used in elementary schooling it is not surprising that the stories might seem a bit passé by the time a Roman reached adulthood, but this does not mean that each generation of children would not approach them as new and poignant. The imagined complaint by Lucilius about the same boring old stories being trotted out over and over again (*decantatae*, Sen. *Ep.* 24.6) is represented as the complaint of a sophisticated adult who has completed the basic moral education and is hungry for something more advanced. This may say more about the role of exempla in the different stages of moral development for an individual Roman than about absolute cultural changes that have taken place by Seneca's day. As we have seen, decades later Quintilian is still claiming

⁷⁶ See Juvenal 8.1–38, with Henderson 1997; Martial with Morello 2018.

⁷⁷ Chaplin 2000: 179–202; cf. Gowing 2005, who argues that Republican exempla lost their force in the first century CE; Walter 2004: 408–426; Kraus 2005 on the idea that exempla fundamentally lost power after the establishment of the principate.

⁷⁸ Berrendonner 2001, Mencacci 2001.

that exempla provide the best basis for early moral education. So exemplary stories may have continued to seem fresh and new to children as they first encountered them, even at the start of the second century.

The second suggestion is that the brevity of the references to exemplary figures that we find in the later first century CE can be taken as evidence that they are losing their richness and drying out.⁷⁹ Tracing the development of the representation of Camillus over this period, Marianne Coudry suggests that the story stops being interpreted anew in the imperial period: 'La figure de Camille cesse pour un temps de faire l'objet de réinterprétations' (Coudry 2001: 67), and becomes 'lapidary'.⁸⁰ In the same volume, Francesca Mencacci distinguishes between these two kinds of sources that she calls *racconti* and *reusi*, 'narratives' and 'redeployments', which she sees as being distinctly different, but as working in relation to one another, so that that a brief redeployment in a speech, for instance, relies on the fuller narrative detail provided in histories and biographies. Her contention is that the longer narrative seeks to fix the significance of the exemplary figure, while the briefer references merely evoke this established meaning to serve some rhetorical purpose in the particular context. This model reflects to an extent the experience of modern scholars who rely on Livy's longer analysis to help us make sense of briefer versions in Valerius Maximus or Cicero, for example. However, if we view all these references – from the most elaborate narratives to the merest allusions – as belonging to a single category, that of remediations engaging more or less extensively with broader sites of exemplarity, then the significance of brevity looks rather different.

We have already had occasion to note that Livy's extended narratives of early republican exempla are unusual, and that it is far more common to find very brief allusions to these exempla, such as those that appear in the genres of oratory or satire or in rhetorical handbooks. As we have seen, the brevity of an allusion does not necessarily shut down interpretation or indeterminacy of significance. Even more importantly, when the reference to a site of exemplarity is brief, this does not necessarily imply that the site

⁷⁹ This process is described as 'dessèchement' (Berrendonner 2001: 108, Coudry in discussion in Coudry and Späth 2001: 190).

⁸⁰ 'La figure de Camille s'y trouve réduite à la représentation de conduites exemplaires, par le biais d'anecdotes simples et décontextualisées, parfois même par la seule évocation de la vertu correspondante, en faisant l'économie de tout support narrative' (Coudry 2001: 48). In n.1, Coudry notes that these span the whole period from the era of Cicero (Posidonius) to the sixth century, suggesting that knowledge of Camillus is consistent across this period. 'C'est à dire qu'il ne disparaît jamais de l'horizon culturel romain.' Walter also traces the Camillus tale, giving an important role to Livy in the shaping of its development (Walter 2004: 382–407).

itself is impoverished, and that it is only comprised of the details and interpretation that are explicit in the text itself. On the contrary, the brevity of these references suggests that the exemplary tradition is thriving. Authors clearly rely on their readers and audiences being familiar with a wide range of exemplary material, and being able to conjure it up from the barest reference. A brief and bare reference in the text is not a direct reflection of a threadbare tradition – quite the contrary. Rather than suggesting that exempla are atrophying and losing their detail and nuance, their appearance in this form may be an indication of the richness of the extratextual tradition with which the texts are able to interact.⁸¹

As Gazich asserts at the start of his study of exemplarity in Propertius, citing an exemplum is always a dynamic act.⁸² Even the slightest reference represents active engagement with the wider exemplary terrain, and even the most oblique allusion is a form of remediation in itself. Although there is certainly a distinction to be made between the brief reference and the more extensive narrative (not least in what they offer the modern reader in the form of information about the site of exemplarity), they should be seen as representing different points on a continuum of remediations rather than as qualitatively different. It is certainly wrong to conclude that increasingly brief references to an exemplary figure indicate the figure's diminishing significance. On the contrary, a brief reference is more likely to indicate that an exemplary tale is fully embedded in the communal psyche, and the site of exemplarity is vitally alive and available as an evocative reference point. This situation adds to the difficulty for the modern scholar. If an ancient audience needed only very little detail in order to make sense of a reference, because an exemplary story was particularly well-known and significant within ancient cultural memory, the reference may be very brief. However, a modern reader is reliant on the detail that is included in the text itself, as this is all we have to go on; in such cases, there may be very little information at all.

This analysis reveals that exemplary ethics was alive and well at the end of the first century – and indeed well beyond this. However, the way our surviving sources from this period mobilise this ethics and engage with the still thriving sites of exemplarity is somewhat different.⁸³ In this diachronic overview of the exemplary terrain, I have expressed some scepticism

⁸¹ On the extratextual tradition of exempla, see also Langlands 2018.

⁸² Citing exemplum is a dynamic act ('un atto dinamico'), which modifies the structure of the texts and makes connections between its parts, Gazich 1995: 3.

⁸³ Annie Vigourt suggests that emulation was still important for the municipal elite addressed by Plutarch (Coudry & Späth 2001: 190).

about the narratives of transformation that have been offered by other scholars, especially the idea of sweeping change in the first century that rendered exempla more or less obsolete. However, I do not wish to downplay the real and profound changes that took place in Roman culture over the two hundred and fifty years 150 BCE–100 CE, nor to deny that there were changes over this period to the specific exemplary stories that were known and used, and also more fundamental changes to the way they were used, as already outlined. These include the intensification of memorialisation and aristocratic competition in the mid-Republic especially around the Punic Wars; the challenge that ‘new men’, such as Cato the Elder and Cicero, posed to the aristocratic domination of exempla; the appropriation of the exemplary discourse by Augustus and its development by later emperors; the impact of the civil wars and of the exemplum of Cato of Utica’s suicide and the emergence of suicide as a means of resistance to imperial power.

Nevertheless, many of the phenomena that have been identified by scholars as signs of decline are better understood as perennial features of exemplarity that may come to particular prominence in particular periods or texts. The identification of a mismatch between past and present, for instance, is not a result of changing social structures so much as an embedded and necessary trope that is related to the moral function of exempla. Ellen O’Gorman has written about the way that exempla endeavour to conceal the ruptures between past and present even as the writers that deploy them remain aware of these ruptures and reflect upon them. She also notes that modern scholars can be too quick to be hoodwinked by this superficial concealment, and to accept the idea that in the Roman past there was an easy match between past and present. She writes: ‘The ancient theoretical discussions of exemplarity are quoted in contemporary scholarship in order to present exemplary thinking in the context of education and everyday cultural practice, and thereby create the illusion of a mode of thought which is characteristic of a stable state. In fact, if we look more closely at the ancient texts from which these accounts are taken, we find exemplarity evoked at different sorts of crisis points in Roman history.’⁸⁴

A sense of moral continuum is important for the functioning of exempla in Roman culture. Nevertheless, ancient writers consistently display a sense of moral change (most obviously, the motif of moral decline that pervades ancient Roman thought), and often reflect on how changing values or

⁸⁴ O’Gorman 2011: 273.

standards affect what counts as successful imitation or as appropriate or outstanding behaviour. This sensitivity to the idea that societies change over time, and that different societies require virtues to be enacted in different ways, forms part of the cluster of meta-exemplary ethics principles described in [Chapter 5](#) as situational sensitivity.

The idea of ‘ideal’ exemplarity located in an earlier time – where exemplum and imitator map perfectly onto one another to generate seamless reproduction of virtue down the generations, and where virtue is recognised and rewarded for what it is – is a fantasy for both modern scholars and for the ancient and post-classical thinkers who evoke it. Perhaps at times this is a fantasy as necessary as the unbroken chain of tradition discussed in the previous chapters, but it should not be mistaken for historical reality. Critical complexity is present in our very earliest sources. We cannot sustain the hypothesis that such complexity and self-awareness first emerges with Latin literature, and was not part of a preceding oral and performance tradition now lost to us. Equally, exempla retain their high cultural value, and exemplary ethics retains its critical complexity at the start of the second century, despite anxieties about the detrimental effects of social and political change. The failure of exemplarity that we find in Tacitus is also present in Livy, the critical perspective of Marcus Aurelius is found in Cato the Elder, anxieties about relevance are found in Cicero, as well as Juvenal, Valerius Maximus makes similar comments about shifting values and standards as his Renaissance successors. These are all inherent features of exemplary ethics, and indications that it is functioning in a healthy fashion. Some of these features will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters in the context of the ethical dynamics of exempla within Latin literature and thought.

Controversial Thinking through Exempla

A key role of exempla in Roman ethics was to promote ‘controversial thinking’. This chapter demonstrates that it is characteristic of Roman exempla to stimulate ethical debate or reflection by incorporating troubling, conflicting or contradictory elements that are difficult if not impossible to reconcile absolutely. The interpretative approaches that I have developed in previous chapters, and especially the idea of the site of exemplarity, have proved especially valuable in enabling me to articulate how this inherent ‘controversiality’ is transmitted within cultural memory, and they underpin this chapter’s analysis of the significance of the controversial and ambiguous elements within Latin texts and the contradictions within the tradition.

The first part of the chapter uses Cicero’s *De finibus* to explore how the dynamic interplay between consensus and indeterminacy facilitates the development of important ethical debates around individual exemplary tales and figures (in this case around the figure of T. Manlius Torquatus). Arguing that it is a characteristic of exempla (or sites of exemplarity) to possess ethical ambiguities, conflicts or difficulties that stimulate such ethical debate and reflection, the chapter then goes on to use the case of Regulus to illustrate the particular ethical value of controversiality for enabling people to penetrate to the heart of ethical questions, and to further outline some of the key ethical debates to which Roman exempla contribute. Treating our individual literary texts as remediations of existing sites of exemplarity will enable us to grasp how each text’s treatment of an exemplary tale is engaging with a wider complex tradition; this and the [following chapter](#) also explore some of the most important literary strategies that Latin texts use to achieve such engagement, to bring out the controversial elements in the tradition, and to maximise their ethical effectiveness.

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As previous chapters have discussed, a site of exemplarity combines a level of cultural consensus about the value and content of an exemplary tale with a level of indeterminacy about its precise moral significance, as well as flexibility as to how it can be persuasively deployed. Cicero's late philosophical work *De finibus bonorum et malorum* (*On Moral Ends*), written in 45 BCE, beautifully dramatises, in its dialogue form, how these features can work together to support ethical thinking even at a high level.¹ As Cicero establishes in his introduction to Book 1, the dialogue *De finibus* is devoted to the fundamental ethical question: what is the ultimate good against which good things are to be measured?² The debate between the characters of Cicero and Lucius Torquatus in Books 1 and 2 about the merits and demerits of the Epicurean approach to the question focuses precisely on the interpretation of one particular exemplary story – that of L. Torquatus' famous ancestor T. Manlius Torquatus – as a concrete instance to help them think through abstract philosophical ideas, and to help each speaker persuade his companions to accept his arguments. A single thread of argument weaving through the first two books of *De finibus* demonstrates how a well-known story can be instrumental in philosophical discussion; the well-known exemplum of Torquatus here provides a point of ethical consensus on which different ethical explanatory frameworks can be tested out, because there is enough room for manoeuvre in interpretation.

The exemplum around which the characters debate at various places in this work is T. Manlius Torquatus, whom we earlier encountered in [Chapter 5](#).³ He is an appropriate choice because he is the revered ancestor of Lucius, and so is chosen by Cicero as a compliment to his interlocutor (or so he claims, at least). Manlius' famous achievements include: his defeat in single combat of the towering Gaul; his taking of the torque from the neck of his dead opponent; and his severe punishment by death of his son who had not followed military protocol in taking part in single combat himself.⁴

¹ As we saw with Seneca's deployment of the exemplum of Mucius, discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

² Cic. *De fin.* 1.11: 'What is the end, the final and ultimate aim, which gives the standard for all principles of well-being and of right conduct? What does Nature pursue as the thing supremely desirable, what does she avoid as the ultimate evil?' . . . *qui sit finis, quid extremum, quid ultimum, quo sint omnia bene vivendi recteque faciendi consilia referenda, quid sequatur natura ut summum ex rebus expetendis, quid fugiat ut extremum malorum?* *De finibus* is, of course, one of the most important philosophical works from ancient Rome, where Cicero explores fundamental questions about the nature of the highest good (cf. *Fin.* 1.11–12); see Annas and Betegh [2016](#).

³ Cic. *Fin.* 1.23, 1.34–35, 2.60–61 and 2.72, cf. 2.105 for a further reference to the exemplum with a slightly different flavour. Very briefly on the authority of the memory of exemplary men in Ciceronian argumentation, see Blom [2010](#): 22–23. See my summary of the story later in this chapter.

⁴ As is so often the case, the most substantial source for this sequence of events is the account of Livy (8.6.9–8.8.2); see also Val. Max. 2.7.6 (with Langlands [2008](#)).

In their arguments in *De finibus*, both Cicero and Torquatus take as a starting point the consensus that Manlius Torquatus and his exemplary deeds represent the highest good, and then move on to speculate about what his motivations might have been for these deeds, in order to further their own claims about what it is that ultimately motivates virtue. In these discussions, we can see the productive relationship between consensus and indeterminacy in action. On the one hand, it is taken for granted that Torquatus' deeds are representative of great virtue; his descendant the Epicurean speaker Lucius Torquatus describes them as 'those deeds that are without doubt magnificent' (*ista, quae sine dubio praeclara sunt*, 1.35).⁵ The term *praeclara* is significant because it combines the sense of moral excellence with that of external recognition by the community. It incorporates therefore within its semantic scope the very idea of consensus, where virtue is decided and confirmed by the judgment of the community. On the other hand, there is room for debate about where precisely this virtue lies, in what sense his deeds are virtuous, and what this can tell us about the highest good.

It is the character of Cicero who first introduces the exemplum early in Book 1, when he is provocatively laying out what he sees as the errors of Epicureanism. To explain why he cannot accept the Epicurean doctrine that pleasure (*voluptas*) is the chief good that motivates every virtuous action,⁶ he asserts:

And it may be that I am wrong, but I am absolutely convinced that the Torquatus who first earned that cognomen neither dragged that famous necklace from the enemy in order to get some kind of physical pleasure from it, nor went to war with the Latins at Vesperis in his third consulate for the sake of pleasure. In fact, since he struck down his son with an axe, he might even seem to have deprived himself of many pleasures, when he prioritised the law of majesty and command over his natural, paternal love.

ac fieri potest, ut errem, sed ita prorsus existimo, neque eum Torquatum, qui hoc primus cognomen invenerit, aut torquem illum hosti detraxisse, ut aliquam ex eo perciperet corpore voluptatem, aut cum Latinis tertio consulatu conflixisse apud Vesperim propter voluptatem; quod vero securi percussit filium, privavisse se etiam videtur multis voluptatibus, cum ipsi

⁵ This conflation of honour and virtue, also contained in the term *honestum*, which Cicero uses to translate the Greek *kalos*, is something that Cicero himself found problematic and tackled in his own writings elsewhere (see the discussion of Gildenhard 2007: 168–187).

⁶ 'Pleasure and pain lie at the root of every act of choice and of avoidance' (Cic. *Fin.* 1.23).

naturae patrioque amori praetulerit ius maiestatis atque imperii (Cic. *Fin.* 1.23).⁷

Here Cicero challenges Lucius to explain traditional Roman virtue in the light of Epicurean philosophy, and to reconcile the deeds of his great ancestor with the tenets of that school of thought, and specifically with the claim that everything is done for the sake of pleasure (*voluptas*).

In response Lucius first counters with the point that the Epicurean attitude to pleasure is more complex than Cicero allows, and that sometimes small immediate pleasures may need to be foregone for the sake of greater future pleasure: ‘Therefore in these circumstances the choice of a wise man always adheres to this, he must reject pleasures in order to secure other greater pleasures, or he must endure suffering in order to avoid harsher suffering’ (*itaque earum rerum hic tenetur a sapiente delectus, ut aut reiiciendis voluptatibus maiores alias consequatur aut perferendis doloribus asperiores repellat*, Cic. *Fin.* 1.33). Then, returning to the example of Manlius Torquatus, he claims that his ancestor’s deed and those of other exemplary figures certainly *are* compatible with Epicurean doctrine, and he challenges Cicero to provide an alternative explanation for the heroes’ actions, implying that it would be absurd to deny that each of the ancient Torquati’s acts can be seen to be aiming at a practical advantage (*utilitas*) of some kind:

Since I hold this opinion, why should I be afraid that I won’t be able to reconcile it with my ancestral Torquati. They are the men to whom you referred a moment ago in a way that was as true to the tradition (*memoriter*) as it was friendly and kind towards me . . . How do *you* interpret their deeds, may I ask? Surely you don’t think that they launched an attack against an armed enemy, or that they were so cruel towards their children and their own flesh and blood without thinking at all about utility or about their own benefit?

hanc ego cum teneam sententiam, quid est cur verear, ne ad eam non possim accommodare Torquatos nostros? quos tu paulo ante cum memoriter, tum etiam erga nos amice et benivole collegisti . . . quorum facta quem ad modum, quaeso, interpretaris? sicine eos censes aut in

⁷ The passage continues with another family exemplum, the same that is paired with it by Valerius Maximus and discussed in [Chapter 5](#): ‘Think too of that Titus Torquatus who was consul with Gnaeus Octavius; when he dealt so sternly with the son who had passed out of his paternal control through his adoption by Decius Silanus, when he summoned him into his presence to answer to the charge brought against him by a deputation from Macedonia of accepting bribes while prisoner in that province, when, after hearing both sides of the case, he gave judgment that he found his son guilty of having conducted himself in office in a manner unworthy of his ancestry, and banished him forever from his sight – do you think he had any thought for his own pleasure?’

armatum hostem impetum fecisse aut in liberos atque in sanguinem suum tam crudelis fuisse, nihil ut de utilitatibus, nihil ut de commodis suis cogitarent? (Cic. *Fin.* 1.34).

The Epicurean argument made here by Lucius is that heroic deeds such as those of Torquatus are performed for external reasons (*causae*), and they are not performed merely for the sake of virtue in and of itself. In contrast, according to Lucius, people like Cicero, who love trotting out heroic tales from history, conceive of these deeds as performed for the glory of virtue itself (*ipsius honestatis decore*):

‘The oratory of your group (and especially your own oratory, since you study ancient history so diligently) is much accustomed to bandy around commemorations of famous and brave men and their deeds, praising them not for some profit, but for the sake of the splendour of goodness itself.’

‘in quo enim maxime consuevit iactare vestra se oratio, tua praesertim, qui studiose antiqua persequeris, claris et fortibus viris commemorandis eorumque factis non emolumento aliquo, sed ipsius honestatis decore laudandis’ (Cic. *Fin.* 2.36).

Lucius, in contrast, wants to argue that virtuous deeds are always performed with a practical end in view, and so he goes through each of Torquatus’ acts in turn and explains the reasons (*causae*) for each deed, attributing to each a practical motivation. The torque was won through single combat, which he undertook for the selfish reasons of survival, acclaim and glory. He fought so well in order to save his own life during single combat. He faced great danger because he was being watched by his comrades in arms, to win their praise and affection. He punished his own son with death to strengthen the discipline in the army and maintain the security of his country:

‘Do you really think that such heroic (*egregios*) men performed such great deeds without any reason (*causa*)? What that reason was, we shall soon see; meanwhile I will assert that if they did these things (which are undoubtedly *praeclara*) for any reason at all, their reason was certainly not the sake of virtue in and of itself. “He dragged the torque from his enemy.” Yes, he defended himself so he would not die. “But he braved great danger.” Yes, in full view of the army. “What did he gain by this?” Praise and affection, which are the most secure guarantees of a leading a life free from fear.’

‘tu tam egregios viros censes tantas res gessisse sine causa? quae fuerit causa, mox videro; interea hoc tenebo, si ob aliquam causam ista, quae sine dubio

praeclara sunt, fecerint, virtutem iis per se ipsam causam non fuisse. ‘torquem detraxit hosti.’ et quidem se textit, ne interiret. ‘at magnum periculum adiit.’ in oculis quidem exercitus. ‘quid ex eo est consecutus?’ laudem et caritatem, quae sunt vitae sine metu degendae praesidia firmissima’ (Cic. *Fin.* 1.35).

Indeed, Lucius goes so far as to say that if there were no further motivation to justify the killing of Manlius’ own son, then he would find it deeply troubling, and would no longer wish to associate himself with such an ancestor:

“He punished his son with death.” If he did that for no reason then I do not want to be the descendant of someone so rash and so cruel. If he did it in order that through his own grief he might ratify the discipline of military command and keep the army in line through fear of punishment during a very serious war, then he had in view the safety of his fellow citizens, on which he understood that his own security depended.’

“filium morte multavit” si sine causa, nollem me ab eo ortum, tam inportuno tamque crudeli; sin, ut dolore suo sanciret militaris imperii disciplinam exercitumque in gravissimo bello animadversionis metu contineret, saluti prospexit civium, qua intellegebat contineri suam’ (Cic. *Fin.* 1.35).

In Book 2, where the character Cicero articulates his critique of this argument from Lucius, the specific response to this interpretation of the exemplum is the suggestion that in essence it imputes a purely selfish motivation to his ancestor’s heroic acts. Inviting Lucius to conjure up Manlius Torquatus himself as an imaginary spectator to their debate, Cicero asks whether he thinks the ancient hero would be happy with Lucius’ characterisation of him as a man guided primarily by his own pleasure.⁸ Would he not prefer to be characterised as someone who has interests of the *res publica* at heart? Lucius’ argument, Cicero claims, has undermined this idea, by showing that the ultimate reason for supporting one’s *res publica* is that one’s own safety depends on its safety.

‘Do you think, Torquatus, that Imperiosus himself, if he could hear our discussion, would rather listen to your speech or mine, when I was saying that he did nothing for his own sake and everything for the sake of the republic, and you, on the other hand, were saying that he did nothing unless it was for himself? If indeed you wanted to make it explicit and if you said

⁸ In conjuring up the spectre of the ancient ancestor himself as witness to their discussion, Cicero is participating in a recognisable practice that is frequently included as part of the exemplary learning process; see Langlands [forthcoming](#).

more openly that he did nothing except for the sake of pleasure, how on earth do you think he would take it?’

‘utrum tandem censes, Torquate, Imperiosum illum, si nostra verba audiret, tuamne de se orationem libentius auditurum fuisse an meam, cum ego dicerem nihil eum fecisse sua causa omniaque rei publicae, tu contra nihil nisi sua? si vero id etiam explanare velles apertiusque diceres nihil eum fecisse nisi voluptatis causa, quo modo eum tandem laturum fuisse existimas?’ (*Fin.* 2.60).

To attack again the association between pleasure and utility that Torquatus has expounded, Cicero introduces a new exemplum, that of Decius Mus, whose self-sacrifice through *devotio* is well established.⁹ He challenges his interlocutor to explain this motif of self-sacrifice (which we have already seen is also prominent in the exemplary tradition)¹⁰ in terms of Epicurean thought.

‘Let’s imagine, if you like, that Torquatus acted for his own benefit – for I prefer to say “benefit” rather than “pleasure,” especially in the case of such a great man; surely his colleague P. Decius . . . both when he pledged himself and then when he plunged on horseback into the midst of the Latins on the battlefield, was not thinking about his own pleasure? Where would he have taken this pleasure and when? Since he knew that he was going to die straight away, and he sought that death with a more ardent intent than Epicurus believed that pleasure should be sought.’

‘esto, fecerit, si ita vis, Torquatus propter suas utilitates – malo enim dicere quam voluptates, in tanto praesertim viro – num etiam eius collega P. Decius . . . cum se devoverat et equo admissio in mediam aciem Latinorum irruebat, aliquid de voluptatibus suis cogitabat? ubi ut eam caperet aut quando? cum sciret confestim esse moriendum eamque mortem ardentiore studio peteret, quam Epicurus voluptatem petendam putat’ (*Fin.* 2.61).

Just as Lucius declares that he would rather not be the descendant of Manlius if his deeds were not justified on grounds of utility, so Cicero concludes by making the provocative declaration that if it really was on account of *pleasure* that Manlius undertook his deeds, then, to his mind, Manlius was not in fact brave at all and exemplary history must be rewritten:

‘What then? Can we really call that same Torquatus brave? . . . If it was for the sake of pleasure that he fought with the Gaul at Aniens when challenged,

⁹ Livy 8.6.10–11, Hor. *Sat.* 1.6, Val. Max. 5.6.6; see also [Chapter 5](#).

¹⁰ See [Chapter 1](#) for discussion of the common theme of self-sacrifice.

and if he took for himself the spoils of both torque and surname for any reason other than that he thought such deeds were worthy of a man, I don't think he *was* brave.'

'quid enim? fortemne possumus dicere eundem illum Torquatus?... si voluptatis causa cum Gallo apud Anienem depugnavit provocatus et ex eius spoliis sibi et torquem et cognomen induit ullam aliam ob causam, nisi quod ei talia facta digna viro videbantur, fortem non puto' (*Fin.* 2.72).

These two resounding claims by Lucius and Cicero give us a clear indication of the consensus with which this text is working: Lucius' suggestion that he might not want to acknowledge Manlius as an ancestor and Cicero's claim that Manlius was not a *fortis vir* are both entirely counterfactual, and they are clearly intended to seem like untenable conclusions. The one thing that everyone *can* agree on is that Manlius Torquatus was a brave and admirable figure. If following an Epicurean argument leads one to the conclusion 'I don't think he was brave', then there is something wrong with Epicureanism. Cicero's *non fortem puto* is an absurd rhetorical stance designed to demolish the argument that Manlius was motivated by the selfish motives of desire for pleasure or utility.

It is notable that here a well-known, perhaps even over-familiar, exemplum is used as a springboard for extensive philosophical debate, and as a means of clarifying some complex philosophical ideas. One feature of the exemplum that enables this discussion to take place is, of course, the consensus that surrounds it. This introduction of the exemplum of Manlius Torquatus assumes first that all interlocutors within the dialogue (and external readers of the dialogue) will be familiar with the elements of Manlius' exemplary deeds, and next that it can be taken as read that he is to be valued as a measure of the highest virtue. This enables all participants to take the figure of Manlius Torquatus as a starting point for investigation of virtue and goodness in the abstract. Without wishing to place too much pressure on a relatively unusual word, I would like to suggest that the use of the term *memoriter* ('according to memory', 'remembering well', or, as rendered in my translation earlier, 'true to the tradition'), used by Lucius to describe Cicero's initial reference to Manlius, is significant, and underlines the extent to which the exemplum to which they are referring is part of shared cultural knowledge embedded in cultural memory, even as it is also part of the family identity and heritage of the Torquati in particular (and indeed it is for this latter reason that Cicero claims to have chosen this example). Their discussion, as depicted in Cicero's work, perfectly demonstrates how well-educated elite men might make use of their shared resource of culturally valued exemplary tales, a practice to which we saw

Lucius refer in *Fin.* 2.36. At the same time, this exemplary material is comfortably open to interpretation and for use as a basis for further philosophical discussion. It is the very openness of this famous exemplum to various interpretations that enables this sophisticated dialogue to take the exemplum as its focus. Moreover, this openness is brought out through the process of imagining what the exemplary Manlius Torquatus' motives might have been and about precisely how actions and virtues are connected. As established in [Chapter 7](#), the discussion of motivation is one of the most important and productive means of exploring the significance of an exemplary act.

It is significant that their inability to come to any conclusion about Manlius Torquatus' motivation does not diminish in either man's eyes the value of that story as an ethical resource. Rather, they have taken a tale whose possession of moral and cultural value is ultimately not in question, and used it to consider some high-level philosophical questions about what might count as moral value, what kind of motivation for deeds would count as a good one, and what, in the end, counts as good in human life.¹¹ To debate these questions, the characters of Cicero and L. Torquatus are employing precisely the techniques of argumentation and imagination that were standard in Roman schools as part of a training in rhetoric and declamation, and which are part of exemplary ethics more generally, as we saw in [Chapter 7](#). Exempla's dual constitution – firmly grounded in some (shifting) shared consensus, yet with a suppleness endowed by their indeterminacy – makes them perfect material for such philosophical enquiry and debate, in addition to persuasion and illustration.

This use of exempla to *think around* issues is found in many ancient works, especially where we have two (or more) sides of a debate shown, as in philosophical dialogues like this one in *De finibus* or in the political debates and military deliberations dramatised in the works of Livy, Sallust or Tacitus, or in the declamation exercises.¹² Exempla often form a kind of pivot between two opposing arguments, as we have seen in the case of Manlius Torquatus in *De finibus*. A powerful way of refuting your opponent's argument is to challenge their interpretation of the very exempla that they have used to support and illustrate it. If you can demonstrate that the exemplum your opponent has deployed should be understood very differently, or at least destabilise the value that your opponent has placed

¹¹ Compare Seneca's use of Mucius' exemplum to challenge *communis opinio*, discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

¹² In ancient Greek and Roman cultures there were no clear boundaries between kinds of argumentation that are often seen as distinct today, especially rhetoric and philosophy.

on it, you have performed a powerful rhetorical manoeuvre, and we see this played out often in ancient literature. Once again this phenomenon highlights the simultaneous persuasiveness and flexibility of exempla – two features that at first glance may look as if they should be in conflict.

For instance, in his account of the Second Punic War, Livy includes an account of a heated debate that took place in the senate in 205 BCE about whether the young general P. Cornelius Scipio (later Africanus), fresh from Spanish victories, ought to be sent to Africa to end the war with Carthage.¹³ Scipio's desire to go on this mission has popular support, but it is opposed by the majority of the senate. The two speakers, Fabius Maximus Cunctator against and Scipio himself in support, both deploy in their opposing arguments the same exemplum of M. Atilius Regulus – whose capture by the Carthaginians some fifty years earlier in 255 BCE is represented as an important episode from the First Punic War. Just as the speakers in the *De finibus*, discussed earlier, respond to one another's citation of the exemplum of Manlius Torquatus, here the exemplum of Regulus is introduced by the first speaker, Fabius, in support of his own position and then picked up and reinterpreted by Scipio in his response, as means of directly countering Fabius' arguments. Once again, the exemplum is used as an argumentational pivot.

For Fabius, Regulus is used as a warning exemplum about the dangers of taking an army into Africa, the fatal consequences of his African mission perhaps all the more poignant because of his initial military successes there. After he had defeated the armies of Hanno and Hamilcar in Sicily at Encomus, Regulus took his troops out to North Africa, where his campaign first resulted in victories over the Carthaginians at Aspis and Adys. However, having failed to negotiate peace with them due to the severity of his demands, he was then defeated and captured after the Carthaginians brought in the help of the more experienced Spartan general Xanthippus. Such, in outline, is the account of the Greek historian Polybius, our earliest source for the episode, writing in the mid-second century. For Polybius, the story ends here, although, as we shall see, later Roman writers tend to focus on a highly charged coda to the story, in which Regulus is sent as a hostage to negotiate with the Romans, advises his fellow countrymen not to negotiate and is sent back to be tortured and killed by the Carthaginians. Polybius, however, ending the story with Regulus' military defeat and

¹³ Livy Book 28. For different insightful discussions of this debate, see Chaplin 2000: 92–99 and 120–130 and O'Gorman 2011: 274–277. Chaplin argues that the debate stages a competition between the experienced Fabius and the younger Scipio, which opposes their different interpretation of the past: Fabius sees his glory as fixed, while Scipio claims that he is still in competition with him.

capture, emphasises the arrogance of Regulus, and structures the story as one of pride before a fall. Polybius describes Regulus as offering ‘the clearest possible illustration of the principle that we should not rely upon the favours of Fortune, above all when we are enjoying success.’¹⁴ Although Livy’s own account of the Regulus episode is lost, it seems from the summary of it in the *Periochae* that it also emphasised the idea of the reversal of fortune: ‘Then, with fortune demanding that a great exemplum of both fates should be produced in the figure of Regulus, the Spartan leader Xanthippus was summoned by the Carthaginians, and Regulus was defeated in battle and captured’ (*quaerente deinde fortuna, ut magnum utriusque casus exemplum in Regulo proderetur, accessit a Carthaginiensibus Xanthippo, Lacedaemoniorum duce, victus proelio et captus est*, Livy. *Per.* 18).

Likewise, in Livy’s account of the later debate, Fabius’ interpretation of Regulus’ fate seems to be drawing on this same moralising tradition surrounding Regulus. His speech introduces Regulus’ exemplum as more recent and more relevant than the Athenian examples he had previously cited:¹⁵ ‘But I am using examples that are foreign and out of date; Africa itself and the case of Atilius Regulus, a famous exemplum of the fickleness of fortune, let them be a lesson for us’ (*externa et nimis antiqua repeto. Africa eadem ista et M. Atilius, insigne utriusque fortunae exemplum, nobis documento sint*, Livy 28.42). Fabius asks Scipio to compare the difficult challenge of Africa with the much easier challenges he has already faced so far in Spain (28.42). Here Regulus’ exemplum is explicitly presented as a warning not only about fickle fortune, but in addition about the dangers of venturing into difficult territories, and specifically about the dangers of taking the fight to Africa.

In his responding speech, Scipio hits back at Fabius precisely by taking back control of this exemplum of Regulus. He starts by fleshing out the narrative details in order to refute its applicability in his own particular circumstances.¹⁶ He attacks Fabius’ account, speaking of him in the third person, as though to appeal to the audience:

¹⁴ Polyb. 1.35. In addition to Polybius, the later Greek writers Cassius Dio and Zonaras are our main sources for the details of Regulus’ life and career, since we are missing the crucial books of Livy. This adds an interesting angle: the details included by these Greek writers do not add up to an exemplary hero; as we shall see, the Roman sources develop a site of exemplarity around the supposed later exploits of Regulus as a captive. For some theories of how the story developed as an exemplum, see Blatter 1945, Leach 2014, but see also the discussion later in this chapter.

¹⁵ O’Gorman 2011: 275: ‘Fabius’ turn to Regulus represents a valorization of temporal proximity and Roman tradition over similarity of events.’

¹⁶ As Ellen O’Gorman notes: ‘Fabius does not go on to outline in detail the ways in which Regulus’ situation is in parallel with Scipio’s. Though there are some implicit parallels there are also many

‘Fabius reminds us that M. Atilius was captured in Africa, as if M. Atilius had been defeated on his first arrival in Africa, and he does not record that the harbours of Africa nevertheless lay open for this same so “unfortunate” general, and that in the first year he managed things in an outstanding fashion and that as far as the Carthaginian leaders were concerned he actually remained unconquered to the end.’¹⁷ So you don’t frighten me at all with this example.’

‘M. Atilius captum in Africa commemorat, tamquam M. Atilius primo accessu ad Africam offenderit, neque recordatur illi ipsi tam infelici imperatori patuisse tamen portus Africae, et res egregie primo anno gessisse et quantum ad Carthaginienses duces attinet invictum ad ultimum perman-
sisse. nihil igitur me isto exemplo terrueris’ (Livy 28.43).

Scipio makes it clear that it is selective ‘remembering’ of this episode that has enabled Fabius to lend it the significance he has. As Jane Chaplin writes: ‘[W]hen Scipio responds to Fabius’ interpretation of Regulus’ invasion as an example of behaviour to avoid, he points out that Regulus was extremely successful at first and indeed was never defeated by the Carthaginians themselves. In other words, Scipio recognises that the lessons one learns from the past have a great deal to do with how one views it.’ The significance of an exemplum can be altered dramatically by adapting, reconfiguring or redirecting one’s focus on its content, or by being selective about which aspects of the site of exemplarity one chooses to dwell on or exclude. Chaplin notes: ‘... even a specific event such as Regulus’ African campaign changes its meaning depending both on where one sets its chronological limits and on what elements one considers integral to it.’¹⁸ By recasting the exemplum like this, Scipio refuses to accept the warning message that Fabius has used it to point up: *nihil igitur me isto exemplo terrueris*, ‘So you won’t scare me with that exemplum.’ Here he acknowledges that exempla guide behaviour not merely by exemplifying noble and virtuous behaviour, but also by showing how consequences of certain acts might play out. This is a pragmatic use of exempla as precedent that is an important exemplary function. However, the lesson about the fickleness of fortune undermines the idea that Regulus’ defeat is inevitable or significant in itself; to see it as an instance of *peripeteia* in the Polybian mode is to detract from its force as a precedent, as Scipio’s refusal to take it

divergences, and Scipio’s refutation of this exemplum goes into considerably more detail about the story of Regulus precisely in order to point up its inapplicability in this context’ (O’Gorman 2011: 275).

¹⁷ That is, because it was a Spartan, Xanthippus, who was the only one able to defeat him.

¹⁸ Quotations from Chaplin 2000: 130.

as a warning may imply. Scipio refuses to see the chronology of events as more significant than the events themselves, so that Regulus' early success can be valued as just as significant as his defeat. Scipio's perspective on the events dismantles the moralising structure of Polybius' pride and fall narrative, to which Fabius is alluding. Finally, Scipio claims that for him the key message of Regulus' exemplum is something rather different: the message that one man's *virtus* can have a very significant effect. Far from discouraging him, this precedent encourages him to think that he too can make a difference by acting in Africa. It is possible to read Scipio's speech here as a reclamation of Regulus – dramatising a transition between thinking of Regulus as a failure to thinking of him as a hero – which as we shall see is an important feature of the Roman tradition more widely.¹⁹

Here, as in the case of T. Manlius Torquatus in Cicero *De finibus*, Regulus' career in Africa is represented as an important historical episode around which there is some consensus. In this case and within this context, it is represented as an episode from recent history from the perspective of the speakers within the text, though it is simultaneously a more distant event for Livy and his contemporaries, who also bring to bear the benefits of hindsight (although, as we have seen, Scipio's interpretation somewhat disrupts the value of hindsight when it comes to attributing value to events). Regulus' fate is used to teach and learn lessons about warfare and ethics, to guide behaviour and to support arguments in favour of courses of action. In drawing broader lessons from Regulus, neither Fabius nor Scipio is here using Regulus precisely as an exemplum of virtue or vice, but rather as a precedent that wises one up to the way that the world can go. For Scipio, Regulus is a precedent relating to military competence and success, whose example shows that it is possible to be successful in campaigns against the Carthaginians in Africa (although the specific circumstances need to be taken into account). In this use of the tale the primary ethical question at issue is how one defines success or failure, and how, therefore, one reads historical events as precedents for one's own situation.²⁰ However, as in the case of Torquatus in *De finibus*, the two speakers' references to Regulus do rest on the assumption that he is a significant

¹⁹ Though cf. Chaplin 2000: 95, who notes that Scipio's own mention of Xanthippus risks undermining his positive evaluation of Regulus, reminding us, as it does, of his eventual defeat at the hands of the Spartan general. This might count as a more oblique form of engagement with the site of exemplarity, where Livy is deliberating evoking aspects of the site that Scipio does not intend, in order to complicate the message of this debate.

²⁰ One issue raised is whether subsequent defeat cancels out earlier victories when it comes to assessing a career – an important question, since so many Roman exemplary heroes end their lives in dishonour, exile and disgrace.

historical figure from whom we can learn. There is a consensus about the ethical value of the exemplum in general terms, while the precise significance is largely indeterminate.

To deploy exempla in argument, whether forensically, philosophically or as an exercise, is to think creatively about how to make the stories meaningful for that specific setting, to bring out new or particular significance. The regular citation of exempla to support different arguments on opposing sides of debates reflects the rhetorical technique of rebutting an opponent's argument by asserting that his use of exempla is ineffective, or by showing the same exempla in a different light. Those trained in Roman rhetoric and oratory were clearly trained in rethinking exempla and creating new significance for them, through skilful engagement with an existing site of exemplarity. This practice reflects a general awareness that there is a range of different ways of presenting and interpreting any given exemplum, and that this range may indeed be limitless.

The works of Cicero and Livy that I have been analysing here are of course not actual debates between two different participants with opposing perspectives; each is a single literary account by an individual author *representing* a debate between characters within the text. These accounts use the dialogic form to bring out the complexity of the issues under discussion, whether at the level of abstract discussions of what constitutes the good, or dramatisation of the issues involved in decision-making in the context of war and international politics. Such complexity is already embedded in the site of exemplarity and the debates that Livy and Cicero stage here constitute a literary technique that strongly highlights the indeterminacy and controversy within the sites of exemplarity with which they are engaging. Within any specific text in which such a debate is described, then, this doubled or multifaceted deployment of exempla has a further and significant effect on the appreciation of ethical ideas. For readers or listeners who stand outside that particular debate and text and may take an overview of it, such a debate draws attention to the ethical complexity associated with the exemplum, sketches out conflicting interpretations and perspectives, and acknowledges what a challenging business it is learning to be virtuous from exemplary stories and exemplary figures.

In the case of Livy's debate between Fabius and Scipio neither speaker could be said to win the debate outright. Scipio gets his way and the senate agrees to send him to Africa, as Roman readers would have known, but, as Jane Chaplin points out, the positive reaction of the senate as represented in the text makes it seem at the time as if Fabius has won.²¹ In terms of

²¹ Chaplin 2000: 95–96.

plausibility, too, neither man's interpretation of the Regulus exemplum is represented as preferable to the other. Fabius is not mistaken when he finds Regulus a useful warning about the fickleness of fortune; yet it is equally plausible for Scipio to take his story as evidence that one man can make a difference. As O'Gorman suggests: 'The debate between Fabius and Scipio over Regulus' exemplarity suggests that "no lesson has been learnt."²² Perhaps we might amend this to the suggestion that multiple, contradictory lessons have been learned, which arise from particular needs and perspectives of the speakers in this debate, but the very contradiction between these lessons entails an indeterminacy within the tradition as a whole, so that the exemplum is left open-ended, capable of teaching more than one lesson, but without a definite single lesson to be drawn once and for all.

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While in this Livian debate Fabius and Scipio use the exemplum of Regulus' success and defeat to dramatise their arguments about military strategy, elsewhere we see evidence of a parallel site of exemplarity of Regulus emerging take a more evidently moralising approach. Like the smiling slave of Tagus, Regulus appears to be moulded into an exemplary hero from unpromising historical material. Eleanor W. Leach has recently given an excellent account of Regulus' transformation into a Stoic hero, and this and other studies suggest a diachronic development where Regulus was originally seen as disgraceful for being captured, but cross-fertilisation with the later Cannae episode (e.g. Livy 22.59) puts him in a better light.²³ My own approach regards the element of disgrace as remaining integral to the tradition and as part of its adoption as an exemplum, rather than being entirely erased by the idea of his heroism. The following section explores this troubling exemplum of Regulus that emerges in the Roman source, and shows how its controversial elements promote ethical thinking.

Given how productive the ethical indeterminacy of the Regulus site proves to be for his near contemporaries Cicero and Horace (as will be discussed further in this chapter), it is a great shame for us that the books in which Livy outlines his own primary account of Regulus' adventures are lost; it would have been instructive to see how this account compared to these 'later' interpretations of Fabius and Scipio that Livy gives us in Book 22, and might have given us a model for thinking about the creative

²² O'Gorman 2011: 277 n. 41.

²³ Leach 2014 with Kornhardt 1954: 121–123 and Harrison 1986.

engagement of remediations with sites of exemplarity.²⁴ Within the wider site of exemplarity, as we can reconstruct it from the extant remediations, there is consensus that Regulus is one of the great Roman heroes, and he appears in numerous lists as a representative of Roman virtue,²⁵ yet the significance of his behaviour is subject to intense debate.

The moralising site of exemplarity that grows up around the figure of Regulus focuses on a coda to the story of his defeat by the Carthaginians that Polybius does not mention at all and that some modern scholars have suspected might have been entirely invented to bolster Roman identity and explain an otherwise embarrassing episode.²⁶ Regardless of its veracity, it crystallises important ethical issues around a plot that generates a recognisable site of exemplarity, a mode of remembering alleged events from the past that contain all the familiar elements of exemplary ethics: a troubling yet inspiring tale, with arresting and gruesome elements, with the lone hero who acts against the wishes of his community but who places the interests of the community above his own, who faces an extraordinarily difficult decision, who is determined not to set a bad precedent for the future.

In this controversial coda to the story of his defeat, Regulus was taken prisoner by the Carthaginians, and then sent to Rome as a prisoner of war as part of an embassy to negotiate an exchange of prisoners – the Carthaginians were hoping to exchange him for some Carthaginian prisoners who were being held by the Romans. Instead of persuading the Roman senate to send back Carthaginian prisoners in his place, however, he instead urged them not to take part in the exchange and was consequently returned to the Carthaginians to face certain death, which he did with courage, enduring all manner of tortures and in some versions the humiliation of crucifixion. In the wider context of the Roman site of exemplarity, it is on this sequence of events that the exemplary aspects of Regulus are usually focused: captivity, the negotiation of hostages and then

²⁴ Although she is not studying them within this framework of cultural memory and sites of memory, Chaplin's discussion of the way that later speakers in Livy's history adapt and rework episodes that he has narrated previously is very useful here (Chaplin 2000).

²⁵ Lists of heroes in which Regulus appears include: Quintilian *IO*, 12.2.30 with 'the Fabricii, the Curii, . . . the Decii, the Mucii'; Horace *Odes* 1.12 in a list of Roman heroes that includes Romulus, Numa Pompilius, Tarquinius and Cato, Scaurus, Paulus, Fabricius, Curius, Camillus and Marcellus; Cass. Dio *Epitome* 63.13: 'I should certainly prefer to be a Mucius, a Decius, a Curtius, a Regulus, rather than a Marius, a Cinna or a Sulla . . .'; Cicero (*Pro Sestio*: 127–131) suggests that the prosecution have attacked Cicero by contrasting him with a patriotic and heroic Regulus who underwent voluntary expulsion from Rome.

²⁶ Blatter 1945, Walbank 1957: 93–94.

torture and death, and these are associated especially with the virtue of *fides*, in addition to the usual values of patriotism and courage.²⁷ The episode is also sufficiently macabre to qualify as an arresting and memorable exemplum, and the horrific and demeaning torture that Regulus was forced to suffer at the hands of the Carthaginians is highlighted in many versions of the story. In the account of Tuditanus that Gellius cites, which may be our earliest extant source (from the second century BCE), Regulus was killed by being deprived of sleep, and alongside this Gellius cites the account of Tubero (a contemporary of Cicero):

Tubero says in his histories that the same Regulus returned to Carthage and was tortured by the Carthaginians in novel ways. He says: 'they shut him up in a deep and darkened dungeon and then after a long period, when the sun was at its most dazzling, they suddenly led him outside and restrained him in front of the sun's blaze and they forced him to look at the sky. They also sewed up his eyelids, fixing them apart so that he was unable to close them.'

eundem Regulum Tubero in historiis redisse Carthaginem novisque exemplorum modis excruciatum a Poenis dicit: 'in atras' inquit 'et profundas tenebras eum clauderant ac diu post, ubi erat visus sol ardentissimus, repente educerant et adversus ictus solis oppositum continebant atque intendere in caelum oculos cogebant. palpebras quoque eius, ne conivere posset, sursum ac deorsum diductas insuebant.'²⁸

The different accounts given by authors of the tortures and death reflect a fascination with the gruesome physical suffering, and also the uncertainty about the details of his death. What is agreed is that the tortures were horrific, and that they were innovative; their innovative nature seems to give authors license to use their own imaginations in devising the most terrible deaths for their protagonist. Diodorus Siculus writes that the Carthaginians cut off Regulus' eyelids with a knife and then had him trampled to death by an angry elephant.²⁹ Valerius Maximus reports that: 'The Carthaginians cut off Atilius Regulus' eyelids, and shut him up in a machine where sharp spikes stuck out on every side, and they killed him with a mix of sleeplessness and continuous drawn-out pain, a species of torture which was utterly undeserved by the man who suffered it, but richly deserved by the ones who invented it' (*Karthaginienses Atilium*

²⁷ Remediations of this site of exemplarity include: Cic. *Fin.* 2.65, 5.82, 5.88, *Tusc.* 5.14, *Nat. Deor.* 3.80, *Pis.* 43, *Phil.* 11.9, *Sest.* 127, *Off.* 3.99–110, *Liv. Per.* 18, *Livy* 28.43.1, 30.30.23, *Val. Max.* 1.1.14, 4.4.6, *Stat. Silv.* 1.4. 86–88.

²⁸ Gell. 7.4.3 citing either (or both) L. and Q. Aelius Tubero, contemporaries of Cicero, and earlier C. Sempronius Tuditanus, historian probably writing shortly after 150 BCE.

²⁹ *Diod. Sic.* 23.16.

Regulum palpebris resectis machinae, in qua undique praeacuti stimuli eminebant, inclusum vigilantia pariter et continuo tractu doloris necaverunt, tormenti genus haud dignum passo, auctoribus dignissimum, Val. Max. 9.2.ext.1).³⁰ For Seneca, the iconic and memorable image with which he recalls the story is of the crucifix, the equivalent to Mucius' fire: *crucem, Regulus* (Sen. *Ep.* 98.12), which is also used by Silius Italicus.³¹

This story is held up as morally edifying in the Latin texts, but is also full of thought-provoking oddities. It provided a case study for legal issues, as well as rich material for philosophical discussions and reflections in ancient Rome (see especially Cicero *De officiis* and Horace *Odes* 3.5).³² In *De officiis*, one of the texts in which such debate takes place, Cicero writes: 'From the many amazing exempla, it would not be easy to say that there was one more praiseworthy or outstanding than this exemplum' (*ex multis mirabilibus exemplis haud facile quis dixerit hoc exemplo aut laudabilius aut praestantius*, Cic. *Off.* 3.110). Yet in this same work he also represents the story of Regulus as one that throws up a series of moral problems some of which he articulates through the objections of hypothetical interlocutors (3.111–113): you might say that Regulus acted stupidly, and contrary to his own interests; he needn't have feared the anger of the gods; shame (*turpitude*) is not same as the greatest evil (*summum malum*); one need not keep one's oath to untrustworthy people; his oath was compelled by enemy violence and so there was no need to keep it; 'the good' represents whatever is the most expedient thing. The troubling nature of the exemplum can therefore be used to think through some complex issues, as we shall see later.³³

Regulus is strongly associated in the tradition with the specific virtue of *fides*, the loyalty that he displays in refusing to break his oath with the Carthaginians, even though the cost for him personally will be very great. Of course, this moral exemplum is also framed significantly by the historical setting of the First Punic War, and keys into a Romano-centric characterisation of the Carthaginians as the enemy *par excellence*. In this

³⁰ On the eyelids being cut off, see also: Cic. *Pis.* 43. Valerius' final comment about how richly the Carthaginians themselves deserved such punishment may be a covert allusion to the strand in the tradition that claims that the Romans did indeed subject Carthaginians back in Rome to torture and death in such a fashion (as seen in the accounts of Diodorus and Tuditanus).

³¹ Sil. *Pun.* 2.342–343, see discussion in the following chapter.

³² On the moral complexity of the Regulus story, see Lowrie 1997, Langlands 2008; on Horace *Odes* 3.5 see Morgan 2005; Cic. *Off.* 3.99 gives an extended version of the story, which then elicits debate within the text about the wisdom of Regulus' decisions. Cf. Cic. *Fin.* 2.65.

³³ See also brief discussion in Langlands 2011, and Dyck 1996 for commentary on the detail of this passage.

site of exemplarity, Regulus' *fides* in standing by his oath to the enemy stands in stark contrast to the infamous perfidy of that same enemy; his fate at their hands is also an illustration of their notorious brutality.³⁴ Conversely his honour at standing by his word to them is enhanced by contrast with their well-known faithlessness (a man of such *fides* will not break an oath sworn even to the most faithless enemy . . .), and his bravery in returning himself to their hands is highlighted by the knowledge that he is handing himself over to the most brutal of torturers. These aspects are brought out in many references to the tale. Early on in the *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, in the very first chapter, Valerius Maximus introduces Regulus with a standard Romano-centric story about Regulus' *fides*, which also identifies Regulus as a foremost exemplum of religious observance and duty towards the gods:

Yet as far as a guardian of religious duty goes, I am not sure that M. Atilius Regulus is not the foremost; from a most glorious victor, through the ambushes of Hasdrubal and Xanthippus the Spartan leader, he was led into the wretched fate of captivity and sent as a legate to the senate and the Roman people, in order that several young Carthaginians should be exchanged for him, a single old man, and he gave the contrary advice and then returned to Carthage, not indeed because he was unaware how cruel and how justifiably hostile to him were those to whom he was returning, but because he had sworn an oath to them that he would return to them if their captives were not returned. Surely the immortal gods might have alleviated his suffering. However, so that the Atilian glory would be all the more splendid, they allowed the Carthaginians to employ their usual methods, and in the Third Punic War, with the destruction of their city, the gods exacted just vengeance for such a cruel torture of the most religiously dutiful spirit.

sed quae ad custodiam religionis attinent, nescio an omnes M. Atilius Regulus praecesserit, qui ex victore speciosissimo insidiis Hasdrubalis et Xanthippi Lacedaemonii ducis ad miserabilem captivi fortunam deductus ac missus ad senatum populumque Romanum legatus, ut ex se et uno et sene complures Poenorum iuvenes pensarentur, in contrarium dato consilio Carthaginem petiit, non quidem ignarus ad quam crudeles quamque merito sibi infestos reverteretur, verum quia iis iuraverat, si captivi eorum redditi non forent, ad eos sese rediturum. potuerunt profecto di immortales efferatam mitigare saevitiam. ceterum, quo clarior esset Atilii gloria, Carthaginienses moribus suis uti passi sunt, tertio Punico bello religiosissimi spiritus tam crudeliter vexati urbis eorum interitu iusta exacturi piacula (Val. Max. 1.1.14).

³⁴ Cf. Val. Max. 9.6.pr on Carthage as the *verum et ipsum fontem perfidiae*; Sall. *Jug.* 108.3; Liv. 21.4.9, *perfidia plus quam Punica*; Hor. *Odes* 4.4.49 *perfidus Hannibal*; Sil. *Pun.* 6.482.

As so often with Valerius Maximus, many of the key motifs and themes from the wider site of exemplarity are efficiently packed into this short passage. The narrative of *peripeteia*, or Regulus' dramatic change of fortune (brought out in the passages of Polybius and Livy, discussed earlier) is sketched out; the idea of Carthaginian perfidy and its contrast with Roman fidelity is here; there is the idea that the cruelty of the Carthaginians will be avenged by subsequent events. Here Valerius extends the timeframe within which events and their consequences are evaluated, so that, rather than ending with Regulus' death, the true end of this story is the defeat of Carthage by the Romans a century later. The passage also introduces the idea that the suffering and defeat itself can be seen as the kind of test against which true virtue can be both tested and brought to its true glory. Valerius suggests that the gods do not make any attempt to alleviate Regulus' suffering because this might have detracted from the shining glory that he won by willingly submitting to the tortures. Such an interpretation of the episode (also found in Cicero's works and developed by Seneca) ties in with Stoic-influenced debates about the role of suffering and misfortune in establishing virtue, and also the extent to which it should be taken into account when evaluating the life of great men.

Cicero *De officiis* 1.39 introduces Regulus as an exemplum of *fides* illustrating how one is bound to keep one's promise to the enemy, even if the promise was made under duress. Like several other authors, Cicero makes a direct comparison with another exemplary tale from the same historical period: the story of the Roman, captured after Cannae, who thought he had absolved himself of his oath that he would return to the Punic camp by immediately returning on the pretext of having left something behind, before he set off for Rome.³⁵ He is a negative exemplum to place alongside Regulus, and to offset the virtue of the latter. These two versions of the prisoner exchange scenario here are complementary rather than conflicting, tending to convey a similar sense of the importance of *fides* in wartime.

One aspect of anxiety generated by the story is the very fact that Regulus found himself in the position of captive at all, a fate that more generally in Roman literature and ideology is seen as highly problematic and stigmatised. Indeed, in many other contexts it is portrayed as a fate

³⁵ On the execution of captives who think they have expiated their oath to Hannibal by sneaking back to camp quickly: Livy 22.61; Cic. *Off.* 1.39–40; Val. Max. 2.9.8; Valerius and Cicero are comparing the behaviour of these hostages directly with that of Regulus. Leach calls this an 'infamous failure of imitation' (Leach 2014: 254, with 254–255 on its resonance with Regulus story).

far worse than death, to be avoided at any cost.³⁶ Regulus' story therefore raises all kinds of ethical anxieties surrounding the treatment of prisoners of war, hostages and captives.³⁷ Some sources try to mitigate the stigma of defeat and captivity by implying that it was not Regulus' fault that he was captured, and that the enemy did not play fair (once more, in stark contrast to his own unfaltering fidelity to his oath). We saw in Scipio's speech at Livy 28.43 (discussed earlier in this chapter) the idea that the Carthaginians did not defeat Regulus themselves, but had to rely on the intervention of the Spartan Xanthippus. Other texts mention the traps and tricks through which Regulus fell into the hands of the Carthaginians, as Valerius Maximus does in the passage cited earlier (Val. Max. 1.1.14).³⁸ All these passages acknowledge that Regulus' status as a prisoner of war problematises his status as exemplary hero. At the same time this focus of anxiety is precisely what adds the persuasive edge to this story, as Horace skilfully demonstrates in his treatment of the Regulus exemplum in *Odes* 3.5.³⁹ In this poem, Regulus himself speaks from the position of the prisoner of war, imprisoned by the cruellest torturers, who is in a position to stay at home with those he loves, standing, indeed, in his own city, surrounded by friends and family who are urging him to stay. If ever anyone had cause to think there might be a good case for allowing brave soldiers captured by the enemy to return home in exchange for ransom or enemy prisoners, it was Regulus.⁴⁰ The fact that he made the decision not to stay in Rome but to head back to Carthage is testament to his own extraordinary ethical judgment and strength, of course, but it is also an endorsement of the harsh Roman

³⁶ For the idea that falling into enemy hands is the worst thing you can do, and to be avoided at all costs, see, for instance: Val. Max. 3.2.12 on P. Crassus provoking his own death; the captive Spartan boy in Sen. *Ep.* 77.14 bashing his own brains out rather than submit to a humiliating command; Sil. *Pun.* 2. 522–525 *leto graviora pati*; *Pun.* 7.20–73 on Cilnius' Mucius-style attempt to dupe and scare Hannibal and Hannibal's determination to condemn him to the captivity he is trying to avoid (7.64–65); at Sil. *Pun.* 10.641–643 the worst thing of all is to be captured; cf. the fate of Decius in *Pun.* 11, whose *trista vincla* 11.349–350 should be a lesson to Perolla.

³⁷ On the exemplum of Regulus as reflecting ethical issues surrounding prisoners of war, see Leigh 2004.

³⁸ For the tricks and traps of Hannibal: Cic. *Off.* 3.99: *ex insidiis captus esset*; Val. Max. 1.1.14: *insidiis Hasdrubalis et Xanthippi*; Sil. *Pun.* 6.326–327: *Xanthippus fraudem nectens*.

³⁹ Indeed, Regulus can be seen as 'a model for recuperating dignity' (Lowrie 1997: 252); cf. 244: 'He is not a pure model of *virtus*, and to that extent serves as an even better corollary to the present: he recuperated his honour from an initial disgrace.'

⁴⁰ The idea that Regulus' own experiences put him in a particular position to pass judgment on the situation is emphasised by the repeated use of the *ego* . . . *vidi* formula (3.5.18–22); he has seen with his own eyes the Roman standards hanging on the Carthaginian walls, etc. The phrase *militibus sine caede* (3.5.20) highlights the shame in being captured alive.

policy towards prisoners of war.⁴¹ In a sense the story requires Regulus to return to torture and death in order to prove that it was not because he was a coward that he had allowed himself to be captured. There are parallels with the structures of the story of Lucretia, who needs to die in order to make it clear that she did not allow herself to be raped by Tarquinius because she was either afraid or willing. Both heroes are surrounded by family members who beg them not to die, but both know that living is not an option if they are not to set the wrong precedent.

In Horace's *Odes* 3.5, probably written in 27 BCE, Regulus is evoked as a ghostly figure who gives his views of a contemporary situation: 26 years earlier, in 53 BCE, the Roman general Crassus had been defeated by the Parthians at Carrhae and thousands of Roman soldiers taken prisoner; it was now Augustus' intention to try and win back the Roman standards that had also been lost in that episode. By this point the Roman captives were no longer of concern, and Horace's poem describes them as having shamefully survived captivity to take Parthian wives and become assimilated into the enemy culture, forgetful of Roman values and customs.⁴² Regulus' speech acknowledges that a natural and instinctive position would be to pity the young men who have been taken captive, but claims that this would set a bad precedent for future generations – and this fear of setting a bad example through self-indulgence is, of course, something that many exemplary figures are concerned with. Because he has a *mens provida*, a 'far-seeing mind', Regulus is able to see more clearly the long-term implications of being lenient towards soldiers taken captive. Rhetorically, it is most effective to have this decision articulated by someone who is himself a prisoner; otherwise it risks seeming callous and unthinking. Yet even Regulus is characterised as exceptionally harsh by Horace, who describes him as *torvus* ('savage' or 'fierce'), as refusing to look at his lovely wife and children, and as abandoning his 'grieving friends' *maerentes amicos* (3.5.47).

The force of the Regulus exemplum, then, derives partly from the fact that his story makes it very clear just what is at stake in adhering strictly to the rules here: the loss of home and family, the infliction of grief upon

⁴¹ Cf. Leigh 2004 on an enduring anxiety about what to do with captured soldiers, which is reflected in the convolutions of Plautus' play *Captivi* but also still relevant in later jurists' writings on *ius postliminium*. Leigh sees this as an important ethical issue that is embodied by this exemplum of Regulus.

⁴² Nisbet and Rudd 2004: 80: 'The story of Regulus, which occupies eleven of the ode's fourteen stanzas, reflects the official indifference to the prisoners' fate.'

them, and then torture, humiliation and death for oneself. Horace's ode makes this especially clear through Regulus' contemptuous description of the loss of virtue of a captured soldier, and his claim that such a soldier can never fight bravely again. Just as, once it has been dyed, wool never regains its original whiteness, so true courage, once it has been lost, does not bother to replace itself in weaker men (*nec vera virtute, cum semel excidit, curat reponi deterioribus*, Hor. *Odes* 3.5.29–30). Just as the female deer gets no braver when she has fallen into the hands of the hunters, a soldier who has entrusted himself to the faithless foe will not regain his courage.⁴³ Regulus is effectively damning himself, but at least he can now prove that he did not 'fear death', since he is deliberately facing the worst kind of death by returning to Carthage.⁴⁴ As Lowrie argues, Regulus' failure, past inadequacy and defeat and his own compromised virtue are integral to what makes him an inspiring and effective exemplum here for the renewal of virtue. Like Valerius Maximus, Horace emphasises that 'he knew full well what the barbarian torturer was preparing for him' (*atqui sciebat quae sibi barbarus tortor pararet*, Hor. *Odes* 3.5.49–50). There are hints here of the Stoic flavour that often characterises the story, and are evocative of the stories of the slave of Tagus with his serene countenance and Mucius staring defiantly at Porsenna as he burns off his own hand; Horace describes Regulus as treating this extremely difficult and extraordinary decision as if it were an everyday matter and as if he were heading off to his country seat rather than to be horribly tortured by the enemy.⁴⁵

As we have seen, the motif of physical suffering and mutilation was an important one in Roman exemplary ethics, tapping into Stoic ideas about the ability of true virtue to equip one to rise above pain and fear. This quality seems to gain a new pertinence in the first century CE, as we saw in the previous chapters. Regulus' exemplum, adorned with whips and

⁴³ As Lowrie puts it: 'But Regulus' own point is that virtue, once lost, cannot be regained, and furthermore he makes this point not just about the Roman captives, but via his actions about himself. If he stands for *prisca virtus* ("old-fashioned manhood") it is already vitiated in his capture' (Lowrie 1997: 256–257).

⁴⁴ Such ethical issues about how far the captured soldier can be blamed for his own fate, and what the responsibilities of his countrymen should be towards him are also explored through a *controversia* topic documented by Seneca the Elder, 'The men whom the general would not let in', which uses the issue of a soldier's responsibility for his capture as part of the argument, and on the other side uses Regulus as a counter-exemplum of a brave leader who met this fate (Sen. *Contr.* 5.7): *pars altera. infestus trecentis fuit; iniquo conlocavit loco; hoc ne argui posset non recepit. capti sunt fortissimi duces, Regulus, Crassus. haec postrema rogantium vox erat: mitte arma; certe lex non vetat.*

⁴⁵ *non aliter tamen/dimovit obstantes propinquos/et populum reditus morantem/quam si clientum longa negotia* (Hor. *Odes* 3.5.50–52). Cf. Lowrie 1997: 256: 'The poem's close is philosophical: Regulus' Stoic bravery in the face of imminent torture and death is overlaid with an Epicurean image of finding quiet in the countryside.'

scourges, iron maidens, sliced-off eyelids and crucifixion, is readily incorporated into the genre of exemplum inhabited by Mucius and the slave of Tagus, while his readiness to return to certain death allows his story to be inscribed into the catalogue of *devotiones* with the Decii and others willing to risk or sacrifice their lives for the country or their community.⁴⁶

Physical suffering generates its own moral questions, which Cicero takes up in a variety of ways in his philosophical works, finding Regulus a rich exemplum. In *De natura deorum* he poses the perplexing question of why good men suffer, and deliberates this, using Regulus as one exemplum among others (Cic. *Nat. deor.* 3.80). At *De finibus* 2.65, the figure of Regulus is used to contribute to the debate about whether pleasure is the motivation for virtue (discussed at the start of this chapter); there Regulus is contrasted to the hedonist Lucius Thorius of Lanuvium, once again to prove that the Epicurean devotion to pleasure is misguided. Elsewhere Cicero frequently uses Regulus to explore the question of whether virtue is sufficient for happiness.⁴⁷

In book 5 of *De finibus*, Regulus is placed in contrast with the figure of Q. Metellus Macedonicus, the proverbial 'fortunate man', who was consul in 143 and is cited by Valerius Maximus as the foremost exemplum of *felicitas* or 'happiness' (Val. Max. 7.7.1; cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 1.85). The comparison between the two men is used to explore the question of whether virtue without suffering is to be preferred to virtue that is accompanied by suffering, a proposition that seems evidently true but is challenged by the Stoic 'paradox' that all goods are equal and all bad things are equal too. Once again, the well-known figures of these famous Roman heroes are evoked in order to make these situations and these moral ideas more vivid and the issues at stake easier to grasp, and to test Stoic principles against some common sense assumptions. Cicero's interlocutor Piso challenges him:

'What then is your view of Q. Metellus who saw three sons made consul (one of them was even made censor and celebrated a triumph), and a fourth son a praetor, and who left these four sons alive and well, and three daughters married, and who himself had been consul, censor, and even augur and celebrated a triumph. If he were a Wise Man, surely he would be happier than Regulus, also a Wise Man, who was killed as a captive in the power of the enemy, by lack of sleep and starvation?'

⁴⁶ See Cic. *Sen.* 75 and Cic. *Phil.* 11.9 for Regulus among other exempla of the ability to overcome the fear of death.

⁴⁷ Cic. *Tusc.* 5.13; *Fin.* 2.65, 5.82; *Parad.* 2.16. I would insist that this deployment is exploration of a question and not illustration of a doctrine as Andrew Dyck would have it (Dyck 1996: 620).

‘Why are you asking me that?’ I said. ‘Ask the Stoics.’
 ‘How, then,’ he said, ‘do you think they would respond?’
 ‘That Metellus is no happier than Regulus.’
 ‘Well then,’ he said, ‘let us start from there.’

ergo, inquit, tibi Q. Metellus, qui tris filios consules vidit, e quibus unum etiam et censorem et triumphantem, quartum autem praetorem, eosque salvos reliquit et tris filias nuptas, cum ipse consul, censor, etiam augur fuisset triumphasset, ut sapiens fuerit, nonne beatorum quam, ut item sapiens fuerit, qui in potestate hostium vigiliis et inedia necatus est, Regulus?

quid me istud rogas? inquam. Stoicos roga.
 quid igitur, inquit, eos responsuros putas?
 nihilo beatorem esse Metellum quam Regulum.
 inde igitur, inquit, ordiendum est

(Cic. *Fin.* 5.82–83).⁴⁸

These questions and answers probe the wider issues of what is achieved by Regulus’ decision and deed, and raises the further questions of what should be counted as valuable. Where does virtue lie, and what are the ethical implications of celebrating Regulus’ actions?

We have seen previously that Polybius drew a moral from Regulus’ defeat about the fickleness of fortune, and the fact that even the most triumphant generals are susceptible to defeat and death (Polyb. 1.35). This association with fortune persists in the Roman site of exemplarity as well, but it acquires a newly moralising twist, becoming both philosophically inflected and also associated with optimistic patriotism in the vein of Mucius.⁴⁹ In Livy’s debate between Fabius and Scipio, we saw them open up a point of discussion about whether Regulus’ military career should be seen as success or failure. There the conflict was dramatised as being between two different perspectives of two different men (who want to draw different conclusions from the story for their own persuasive ends). Elsewhere however we see that this lack of determination about whether Regulus is a success or a failure is something that constitutes moral contestation within the site of exemplarity more generally; it is possible to access both perspectives simultaneously, thereby raising a set of questions about what it means to be fortunate and how far a person has control of their own life. In Regulus’ first appearance in *Memorabilia Facta et*

⁴⁸ One could read Cic. *Fin.* 5.88 as suggesting that such use of these Roman exempla already had its roots in the philosophical thought of Zeno: *ille Metelli vitam negat beatorem quam Reguli, praepondendam tamen, nec magis expectandam, sed magis sumendam et, optio esset, eligendam Metelli, Reguli reiciendam*. Cf. Cic. *Att.* 16.11 on exempla and Panaetius.

⁴⁹ See [Chapter 1](#). Cf. Walbank 1957, vol. 1: 92–93 on mutability of fortune in Polybius’ account of Regulus.

Dicta, for instance, he is described by Valerius Maximus in terms of both glory and defeat (1.1.14), and this is restated in a later description of him as ‘at once the glory and the greatest disaster of the First Punic War’ (4.4.6).⁵⁰

Later Florus too, rendering the story in exemplary form, encapsulates the key idea that his untouched virtue enables Regulus to rise above his defeat by fortune, reflecting another strand of ethical implications:

At this point the tide of fortune turned a little, but only just enough to afford more indications of Roman courage, whose greatness is often proven by calamities. For the enemy turned to external help, and when Sparta sent the general Xanthippus to them, we were conquered by a very experienced man of war – a disgraceful disaster which the Romans had not yet experienced – and the bravest of generals fell into the hands of his enemies alive. But he was equal to such a great disaster; he was not broken by the Carthaginian prison, nor by the mission that he undertook. For, disobeying the command of the enemy, he judged that there should be no peace terms made, and no exchange of captives with the enemy. However, his majesty was not damaged by his voluntary return to the enemy, nor his final punishments of imprisonment or crucifixion; on the contrary he was the more admirable for all these things, and what can one say except that he triumphed victorious over his victors, and even, since Carthage had not yielded, over fortune itself?

hic paululum circumacta fortuna est, tantum ut plura essent Romanae virtutis insignia, cuius fere magnitudo calamitatibus adprobatur. nam conversis ad externa auxilia hostibus, cum Xanthippum illis ducem Lacedaemon misisset, a viro militiae peritissimo vincimur – foeda clades Romanisque usu incognita – vivus in manus hostium venit fortissimus imperator. sed ille quidem par tantae calamitati fuit; nam nec Punico carcere infractus est nec legatione suscepta. quippe diversa quam hostis mandaverat censuit, ne pax fieret, ne commutatio captivorum reciperetur. sed nec illo voluntario ad hostis suos reditu nec ultimo sive carceris seu crucis supplicio deformata maiestas; immo his omnibus admirabilior quid alius quam victor de victoribus atque etiam, quia Carthago non cesserat, de fortuna triumphavit? (Florus 1.18.22–25).

So this developing strand of the Roman tradition explicitly challenges the idea (found in Polybius and other writers) that Regulus was a victim of fortune, and characterises him instead as someone who has the moral strength to rise above both the misfortunes and the temptations of an

⁵⁰ Val. Max. 1.1.14: *ex victore speciosissimo insidiis Hasdrubalis et Xanthippi Lacedaemonii ducis ad miserabilem captivi fortunam deductus*, (‘From the most splendid victor, led by the plotting of Hasdrubal and the Spartan leader Xanthippus to the miserable fate of a captive’) and 4.4.6: *primi Punici belli qua gloria qua clades maxima*.

easier solution with which other men may not be able to cope. Combatting (and at the same time drawing attention to) the anxieties aired in Horace's *Odes* 3.5, Florus defiantly describes the captured Regulus as 'the bravest of generals' at the time of his capture, in contrast to Valerius Maximus' equivocating description cited earlier.

As we have seen, Cicero had already developed the figure of Regulus as a means of discussing in philosophical terms the ideas of happiness and good fortune. Indeed, his first airing of this idea is not in a philosophical work, but in his invective of 55 BCE against (the Epicurean) Piso, where Regulus is represented as being able to rise above the physical suffering inflicted on him by the Carthaginians because he is conscious of doing the right thing morally:

I don't think that even the famous M. Regulus, whose eyelids the Carthaginians cut off and whom they killed with sleeplessness by tying him to a torture machine, suffered any 'punishment'; . . . all those were the weapons wielded by fortune, not by guilt; punishment is the penalty paid for wrongdoing.

nec mihi ille M. Regulus, quem Karthaginienses resectis palpebris inligatum in machina vigilando necaverunt, supplicio videtur adfectus, . . . fortunae enim ista tela sunt, non culpae; supplicium autem est poena peccati (Cic. *Pis.* 43).

Here the exemplum of Regulus is used to pry open questions such as the extent to which punishment diminishes a person, or the extent to which virtue and consciousness of being in the right and doing the right thing might act as a means of defence against the weapons of fortune. The idea that consciousness of one's own virtue might be enough to alleviate physical suffering, or at least to neutralise its force as punishment and humiliation, is one which will, of course, see intensification in the Christian idea of martyrdom. Cicero returns to this idea in his later philosophical writings. For instance, in his treatment of the second Stoic paradox ('that virtue alone is sufficient for living a happy life', *in quo virtus sit ei nihil deesse ad beate vivendum*, Cic. *Para.* 2), he develops this idea around the exemplum of Regulus:

Indeed I have never thought that Marcus Regulus was suffering or unfortunate or wretched. For it was not his greatness of spirit that was tortured by the Carthaginians, nor his gravity, nor his loyalty, nor his constancy, nor any other virtue, nor was it, finally, his mind itself, which, defended and accompanied by so many virtues, was surely unable to be captured when his body was seized.

nec vero ego M. Regulum aerumnosum nec infelicem nec miserum umquam putavi; non enim magnitudo animi eius excruciabatur a Poenis, non gravitas non fides non constantia non ulla virtus, non denique animus ipse, qui tot virtutum praesidio tantoque comitatu, cum corpus eius caperetur, capi certe ipse non potuit (Cic. *Para.* 2.16).

This treatment of the exemplum ties in with the ideas about the distinction between mind and body and about identity, freedom and virtue that we have seen were emerging in the first century CE.⁵¹ As one might expect, this is an angle on the Regulus story that is also taken up by Seneca, and he uses the example of Regulus' suffering much as we have seen him use the example of Mucius' suffering.⁵² In *De beneficiis* Seneca uses Regulus as an example of this same quality of being invincible in spirit even if he has been conquered in body, and he does so in a context in which he explicitly claims this as a quality that can be possessed by anyone:

This, which they [the Spartans] guard in their own citizens, is made available to everyone by virtue and the desire to be good, since the spirit is unconquered even in the midst of defeat. Therefore no one says that the three hundred Fabii were 'conquered', but that they were 'killed' and Regulus was 'captured' by the Carthaginians, not 'conquered', and whoever else has been crushed by the force and weight of savage fortune has not yielded in spirit.

hoc, quod illi in suis civibus custodiunt, virtus ac bona voluntas omnibus praestat, ne umquam vincantur, quoniam quidem etiam inter superantia animus invictus est. ideo nemo trecentos Fabios victos dicit, sed occisos; et Regulus captus est a Poenis, non victus, et quisquis alius saevientis fortunae vi ac pondere oppressus non submittit animum (Sen. *Ben.* 5.3.2).⁵³

As we have seen, Cicero uses Regulus in his *De officiis* to explore philosophical ramifications of duty, questions about what is honourable and virtuous, and challenges of ethical decision-making (3.99–115, incorporating a range of ethical issues). By using Regulus as his climactic exemplum in this treatise, Cicero associated Regulus with the idea of a person who

⁵¹ See [Chapters 10](#) and [11](#).

⁵² E.g. at *De providentia* 3.9 Seneca argues that the greater the torture, the greater the glory; he claims that, if you asked Regulus, he would want to do it all again, that 'most men would rather be born a Regulus than a Maecenas' and asks 'what injury did fortune do to him?' Seneca's elaboration makes explicit the ethical implications of Valerius' suggestion that the gods deliberately made Regulus suffer in the way at the hands of the Carthaginians in order to render his achievements more spectacular (Val. Max. 1.1.14).

⁵³ On the idea that virtue cannot be taken captive, defeated, conquered or killed (and thus the virtuous person is always free), see also Val. Max. 6.1.ext.1; Seneca on Cato. This becomes a salient ethical idea under the principate when liberties and powers are being curtailed in other ways.

faces a really difficult decision, and manages to make the right one even though it involves sacrificing much that is dear to him (his home, his fatherland, his family, his comforts, his life, his freedom from pain and torture).⁵⁴

When he arrived in Rome, he saw what appeared to be the expedient course of action, but he judged it to be the wrong according to the requirements of the situation; it was this: to stay in his homeland, to be in his own home with his wife and children, and, judging the disaster that had befallen him in war to be a common outcome of the fortunes of war, to hold on to his rank of consular honour. Who says that this was not the expedient course of action? Who do you think? Greatness of mind and bravery say that it is not.

is cum Romam venisset, utilitatis speciem videbat, sed eam, ut res declarat, falsam iudicavit; quae erat talis: manere in patria, esse domui suae cum uxore, cum liberis, quam calamitatem accepisset in bello communem fortunae bellicae iudicantem tenere consularis dignitatis gradum. quis haec negat esse utilia? quem censes? magnitudo animi et fortitudo negat (Cic. *Off.* 3.99).

As Cicero also explains in a letter to Atticus in November 44 BCE, in which he describes writing this treatise, Regulus perfectly embodies the situation of having to distinguish between the genuinely expedient course of action and the one that only *appears* expedient (Cic. *Att.* 16.11). As this book aims to show, many other Roman exempla also put into play such questions about perception and evaluation. In this chapter, I have used Regulus as a case study to illustrate how the controversial elements of a site of exemplarity could be, and were, used in ancient Rome to explore a range of ethical issues. These range from broader cultural, political and military issues such as how one should treat captives, to the more abstract and philosophical issues about virtue and identity that we see explored by Cicero and Seneca. In addition to the example of Mucius, the [following chapter](#) will also discuss the cases of Torquatus, Horatius and Fabius in this light.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ This quality of ethical discernment is also associated here and elsewhere with the familiar motif of the single hero who must swim against the tide of popular opinion, and who is the only one who is able to see the right path of action. We shall see in the [following chapter](#) that it is emphasised in the site of exemplarity surrounding the figure of Fabius Maximus Cunctator as well.

⁵⁵ Other exempla with evidently controversial elements and the ethical issues they put into play include: Scaurus who rose to greatness from poverty but drove his son to suicide (Val. Max. 5.8.4, Hor. *Odes* 1.12); Manius Curius (Dentatus), a victorious general dining on turnips; Camillus, a victorious general ostracised and exiled; weeping Marcellus, with conflicting accounts of this defeat of Syracuse, prompting debates about the treatment of victory spoils and the conquered enemy; Q. Metellus Macedonicus, the happiest man who ever lived, who was overly strict and had

In the case of Regulus, the specific troubling elements of the story or site of exemplarity which lie behind each remediation include: the sacrifices that Regulus has to make and also those that he forces others – his family and friends back in Rome – to make on his behalf; the anxiety that he has been first defeated and then taken prisoner, a shameful position for a Roman to find himself in; the uncertainty about whether one would actually be happier being tortured than living a life of luxury. When it comes to the practical application of this exemplum to ethical discussion, decision-making and action, these ‘difficult’ aspects of the exemplum serve to convey how tricky it can be to discern virtue and the correct course of behaviour. They highlight the importance of *constantia* (‘perseverance’) and self-belief, and the ability to carry out one’s plan of action regardless of the opposition one faces from the people around one; they emphasise the fact that doing the right thing can entail going against the advice of your closest friends and supporters, and even ignoring the pleading of your friends and family. True virtue often involves going it alone, as you are the only one who realises what the right course of action is. Many of these issues are shared with other Roman exempla and those are often used alongside the exemplum of Regulus to enhance their power; we have noted how often Regulus is compared and contrasted with other figures from Roman history (for instance, with Thorius, Metellus, Marcellus or the prisoners taken at Cannae).

The knotty aspects and unresolved details in the tradition surrounding Regulus, then, do not reflect so much competing positive and negative (or pro- and anti-Roman) traditions. Rather they reflect a complex site of exemplarity where the positive and negative aspects play off one another, where problems are acknowledged and addressed, and where anxieties about Regulus’ behaviour and the various possible trajectories and interpretative lines of his story are used to explore some key ethical issues. For instance, versions which emphasise the idea that Regulus conquered fortune are not seeking to erase the versions where he is seen as defeated by fortune’s whim, but rather to engage directly with that interpretation of events in such a way as to – perhaps – explore the question of how one might cope admirably with disaster, how one should negotiate the blows of misfortune, what it might mean to be a happy or fortunate person. They rely on awareness of an alternative, ‘Polybian’ way of thinking about Regulus and telling his story, and are in dialogue with that alternative

feuds with all his peers; Flaminus (cf. Val. Max 2.9.3; Cic. *Sen.* 42, but also the case study of *maiestas* in *ad Herennium*).

interpretation.⁵⁶ As we saw at the end of [Chapter 9](#), O’Gorman relates this open-endedness of Regulus’ moral lesson to the haunting quality of an exemplum that is not fully comprehended by the memory tradition within which it is handed down, leading to its ‘continual reworking’ and the ‘difficulty with assimilation.’⁵⁷ As I argued there, this inability to be fully comprehended is a characteristic feature of all sites of exemplarity, part of the contestation that keeps them alive.

Indeed, many other scholars over the years have recognised the presence of such features of contestation and controversiality in a wide range of ancient exempla, both in terms of the ambiguous moral status of the exemplary figures and episodes themselves and in the conflicting accounts found in the ancient sources about their deeds and moral worth. However, the significance of both these phenomena – that they are actually two aspects of the same phenomenon of controversiality – has not yet been fully understood.

Firstly, individual exemplary figures in the Roman tradition are regularly identified by scholars as being morally ambiguous, yet this ambiguity is generally thought to be anomalous. Indeed, it is striking how often a scholar will identify a particular single exemplary figure or story as ambiguous or troubling: Fabius’ virtue is ‘equivocal’ (Littlewood 2011: lxiii); Regulus is ‘double-edged’, ‘problematic’,⁵⁸ his story full of ‘ambiguity and uncertainty’ (Leach 2014: 243), Scipio has an ‘inherent dualism’ (Tipping 2010: 185–192), Cato is a ‘controversial exemplar’ (Mayer 2012: 124), Marius ‘was subject to radically different interpretations’ (Feldherr 1998: 97, n. 50), and so on. However, while these scholars acknowledge the ambiguity of their own particular exemplary figure or tale, they tend to make the assumption that exempla are otherwise usually straightforward and that it is only the exemplum that is the focus of their own analysis that is an exception to this, standing apart from the rest as an especially complex case.⁵⁹ Thus, Roller describes the exemplum of Fabius as an ‘anomaly’

⁵⁶ In the next chapter, we shall see how Silius evokes these conflicting interpretations of Regulus through his poetic treatment of the figure.

⁵⁷ O’Gorman 2011: 177, n. 41.

⁵⁸ Chaplin 2000: 24 on Regulus’ ‘complexity’; cf. Chaplin 2000: 95, n. 52 ‘The summary for Book 18 suggests that Livy anticipates the double-edged nature of Regulus as an exemplum: *quaerente deinde fortuna, ut magnum utriusque casus exemplum in Regulo proderetur, arcessito a Carthaginiensibus Xanthippo, Lacedaemoniorum duce, victus proelio et captus est.*’

⁵⁹ With a broader acceptance of the ambiguity of exempla within specific literary works, see now Goldschmidt 2013: 161: ‘[W]hen they are performed or deployed by Romans, exempla in the *Annales* can be double-edged and difficult’, and Tipping 2010: 14 on Hannibal: ‘Hannibal is, however, an exemplum of the instability of exemplary heroism’, which is, however, acknowledging this instability as a particular feature of Silius’ work rather than of the tradition more generally.

possessing ‘unusual moral ambiguity’ (Roller 2011: 184), Chaplin describes the ‘unusual instability’ of Regulus as an exemplum (2000: 94–95).⁶⁰ My own argument is that, in fact, such moral ambiguity is the norm for exemplary figures, and this chapter has set out to explain the purpose it serves within exemplary ethics.

Second, when different ancient sources disagree with one another about the moral evaluation of the exemplary figure or episode, scholars have tended to try and resolve the contradictions one way or another. Broadly, they either try to fix the meaning of the exemplum by focusing on one side of the controversy as the right interpretation and by dismissing alternatives (as illustration see my discussion in the following chapter of Skutsch and Levene on Torquatus), or, more productively, they seek to explain conflicting aspects of the site of exemplarity by attributing them to competing traditions with different political or literary agenda; for excellent examples of this see Harriet Flower on the ‘competing traditions’ surrounding the figure of Marcellus (Flower 2003) or Eleanor Winsor Leach on Regulus (Leach 2014).⁶¹

My own position is that both the moral complexity and the conflicting traditions are best understood as part of a single heterogeneous site of exemplarity that deploys contradiction and lack of clarity to ethical purpose. Far from being exceptional, these are features that are common one way or another to all exempla and their sites of exemplarity, and indeed they provide the engine of an exemplum’s ethical function. The concept of the site of exemplarity, articulated in Chapters 8 and 9, facilitates our appreciation that conflicting elements in the tradition are not separate and opposing threads, but rather part of the same complex coherent site. These elements typically work off one another to promote ethical reflection and consideration, and our most interesting works of ancient literature, in their remediation of sites, make an effort to enhance this controversial potential by deploying a range of literary techniques. The ability to conceptualise the tradition surrounding a particular exemplary figure as a site of exemplarity, subject to the dynamic forces of cultural memory, and constituted by remediations, including the ephemeral as well as the literary, is invaluable

⁶⁰ Chaplin 2000: 94–95. ‘Because of his unusual instability, Regulus is a problematic *exemplum*, both for Scipio in his speech and for Livy generally.’ Cf. the claim of Eleanor Winsor Leach that ‘Within the traditions of Roman exemplarity, the case of M. Atilius Regulus . . . is singular’ in its ‘extent of ambiguity and uncertainty’, which frames her discussion of his exemplum (Leach 2014: 243).

⁶¹ See also Augoustakis 2010, chapter 3. Matthew Roller’s discussion of the tradition surrounding Fabius Maximus (Roller 2011), which acknowledges it as a complex whole, is an important exception to this trend, and is discussed – although, as I have noted, he sees Fabius as an anomaly.

when it comes to appreciating how the controversial elements work. What renders these sites of exemplarity essentially controversial are the elements that draw the conflicting versions or interpretations into dialogue with one another, actively provoking and promoting discussion or reflection on important ethical issues. This chapter has discussed some of the key aspects of the sites of exemplarity surrounding the figures of Torquatus and Regulus which contribute towards making these sites of exemplarity controversial. The [following chapter](#) further discusses the strategies that particular works of Latin literature deploy in their engagement with these and other sites of exemplarity, in order to enrich their own accounts, and to draw out the controversial and ethical implications of the episodes.

Literary and Philosophical Adventures in the Exemplary Terrain

The [previous chapter](#) sought to make clear why their controversial nature is so central to these sites of exemplarity, and how this functions in ethical terms. This approach also helps to shed new light on numerous passages from ancient literature by elucidating the ethical and literary framework within which ancient literary texts are working. It also enables us to appreciate the specific literary techniques that are deployed to highlight and exploit the controversiality of these sites of exemplarity, to appreciate the wider significance of some important literary analyses in existing scholarship, and to address scholars' puzzlement at the moral complexity of accounts found in the ancient sources by explaining the relation of such complexity to a wider tradition. This chapter argues that when Latin literary texts refer to exempla they are usually acknowledging and engaging with a morally complex site, and that often they are deliberately evoking its complexities in order to make the most of the potential ethical impact of the stories. It will explore some of the key literary strategies that they use to do this.

Let us start by returning to the case of T. Manlius Torquatus, discussed at the start of the [previous chapter](#), which is one of the most overtly controversial exempla. Within Manlius Torquatus' career, it is the episode where he executes his own son (the episode that is also most evidently troubling for a modern reader) on which most of the exemplary controversy is focused. The episode, in my own summary (based on Livy's account at 8.7) unfolds in the following way:

The story of Titus Manlius Imperiosus Torquatus and his son takes place in the year 340 B.C.E during a revolt by the Latins against Roman rule. Manlius Torquatus was in command of Roman troops and his own son was among his men. The son was sent on patrol with a handful of others, with strict instructions not to engage in fighting with the enemy. But they were accosted by a fierce warrior from among the enemy who challenged the son Manlius to single combat. Manlius took up the challenge (partly inspired by the fact that his

father had won glory in his youth by winning in single combat against a Gaul), and he won the fight. He returned in triumph to his father in the Roman camp, bearing the spoils of his victory. However, he had disobeyed his father's command not to engage in combat, and he had not obtained permission for the fight beforehand. His father felt that he must punish him in order to maintain the chain of command and make it clear to everyone that it cannot be broken with impunity. Therefore he decided to execute his son, and beheaded him as a lesson to all about military discipline.¹

This site of exemplarity has a complexity that has sometimes stumped commentators, who have found it hard to work out what it meant to the ancient Romans. We have seen in the [previous chapter](#) how the interlocutors of Cicero's *De finibus* agree that Torquatus is a positively valued heroic figure, whose behaviour also causes some anxiety. Even in that dialogue there are hints of the discomfort that the story may cause. There, Lucius describes the acts of his ancestors as *crudelis* ('cruel', Cic. *Fin.* 1.34), and his declaration that if he believed that his ancestor had killed his own son for no good reason then he would rather not be associated with him has highlighted the horrific nature of the act, which without sufficient grounds would be unforgivably brutal. Later on, Cicero's reference to the notion that Manlius Torquatus was excessive in his strictness is deployed as part of a warning to Lucius not to place impossible demands upon him, lest he should outdo his own ancestor in imperiousness: 'Take care lest your demands be "Manlian" or even worse, if you demand things that I cannot do' (*vide ne ista sint Manliana vestra aut maiora etiam, si imperes quod facere non possim*, Cic. *Fin.* 2.105).² Elsewhere in antiquity this anxiety about cruelty and brutality is expressed more explicitly, when Manlius' strictness is described as excessive, as transgressing the bounds of appropriate behaviour. Several ancient sources, for instance, refer to the fact that the phrase *Manliana imperia* ('Manlian command') was proverbial in antiquity for excessive strictness or excessive brutality.³ Although he elsewhere praises the actions of Manlius the father in his work, Valerius Maximus in one

¹ In addition to the lengthy account at Livy 8.7, and the references in Cicero *De finibus* discussed in [Chapter 12](#), ancient sources include: Dion. Hal. 8.79.2; Cic. *Sulla* 32; Sall. *Cat.* 52.30–31; Virg. *Aen.* 6. 824–825; Val. Max. 2.7.6, 5.8.3, 9.3.4. See [Chapter 4](#).

² Cf. Horace *Epistles* 1.5.4–5 for another allusion to *Manliana imperia* in the context of a contemporary Manlius Torquatus.

³ See e.g. Cic. *Fin.* 2.32.105; Livy 4.29.6, 7.12.12, 8.7.22; 8.34.2, 23.47.1; Gell. *NA* 17.21; cf. Oakley 1998: 86 describing the quality as 'excessive severity or officiousness'. See also Livy 22.60.5 where Torquatus' descendant is described as having a *severitas* that is 'too harsh' (*nimis durae*) and Sil. *Pun.* 11.73–74. Cf. also the alternative *Postumiana imperia* (Livy 4.26) and see Ogilvie 1965 ad loc.

passage describes the son as ‘punished too harshly’ (*nimis aspere puniti*, Val. Max. 9.3.4).⁴

Such critical allusions in ancient texts have led some modern commentators to go so far as to think of Torquatus as offering a negative exemplum – a model of behaviour that should be avoided – and to interpret Livy’s description of it as a *triste exemplum* or ‘harsh exemplum’ (8.7.17) as wholly critical. Otto Skutsch, for instance, allows his revulsion at Torquatus’ deed to colour his interpretation of Livy’s description of a counsel of war (8.6.14) at which it is decided that there is a need to exercise strict command to return the military discipline to what it was: ‘This invention can have no other purpose than to justify the revolting cruelty of the elder Manlius, which according to Livy’s own report (8.12.1) made the youth of Rome turn away from him with loathing.’⁵ Identifying Torquatus as a negative exemplum has also made it hard for David Levene to make sense of Sallust’s reference to the exemplum at *Catiline* 9.4, where Torquatus seems to be referred to in positive terms,⁶ and he comments on this passage: ‘[I]t is a surprising example for him to introduce, given that its traditional connotations at Rome were far from positive: it was regularly used as an *exemplum* of strictness excessive to the point of cruelty. An allusion to it thus seems rather strange in the context of the Archaeology, since it would tend to undermine the rigorous dichotomy between the virtuous past and the vicious present, reminding the reader of actions in the past that were at best morally complex and at worst entirely unacceptable.’⁷

Such interpretations of this as a purely negative exemplum miss the point that when one thinks of this exemplum one is intended to understand it as *both* too severe *and* admirably disciplined at the same time. The tension between the two simultaneous positions is productive. In this passage Sallust is painting a picture of an idealised past where the only transgressions that were committed were those of people too heroic, too

⁴ Cf. Val. Max. 2.7.6 and 6.9.1.

⁵ Skutsch 1985: 317; as further evidence ‘for criticism of Manlius, direct or implied’ he cites Livy’s own use of the phrase *triste exemplum* (at Livy 8.7.22) and Cicero *Pro Sulla* 32, both of which are problematic as evidence, as we shall see. The much later reference in Claudian *IV Cons. Hon.* 403 is clearly citing this as a negative exemplum however, and suggests a new take on the story by the fourth century.

⁶ ‘In wartime, punishment was more often inflicted on those who had fought against the enemy contrary to orders, or who had left the battle too slowly once they had been recalled’, *in bello saepius vindicatum est in eos qui contra imperium in hostem pugnaverant quique tardius revocati proelio excesserant* (Sall. *Cat.* 9.4). Cf. Levene 1993: 222–223 on the Livian passage, and Lipovsky 1981: 112–115.

⁷ Levene 2000: 177.

brave and too eager to fight the enemy; it is an important element of the exemplum that the son himself is an admirable warrior, honoured after his death, whose sacrifice, especially by his own father, is a shocking act, even for the noble sake of military discipline. The horror one feels at its brutality enhances one's appreciation of the extraordinary discipline manifested by the heroic father; one's admiration at his loyalty to the Roman state enhances the revulsion at his bloody filicide.⁸

The ancient sources do not merely demonstrate awareness of these inherent tensions and contradictions. As often as not they actively work to highlight the contradictions and explore their implications. Livy's account, for one, is more complicated than Skutsch's response to it might suggest. Livy's resounding conclusion to the story – 'and Manlian commands not also caused horror at the time, but were also held as a harsh exemplum for posterity', *Manlianaque imperia non in praesentia modo horrenda sed exempli etiam tristic in posterum essent*, 8.7.22 – is perhaps ambiguous as to what kind of exemplum this might be, and whether it is one to imitate or avoid. Yet it directly echoes the words that are spoken earlier by Torquatus himself as he explains why he must kill his son: 'We shall set an exemplum that is harsh, but will be salutary to the young men of the future', *triste exemplum sed in posterum salubre iuventuti erimus*, 8.7.17). Andrew Feldherr's analysis of Livy's treatment of the episode beautifully brings out the nuances of the tale. He comments: 'Nothing in the text leads us to look for compromise or reconciliation. The consul predicts that the exemplum he produces will be both *triste* and *salubre*, and indeed it is the very cruelty of the penalty that is the key to its effectiveness . . . The execution, then, rather than harmonising the social and ethical tensions resulting from Manlius's disobedience, necessarily articulates them with the greatest clarity . . . The episode therefore generates a double historical legacy; the image of the young man's victory and the consul's cruelty are infixed in the disciplinary *exemplum* he produces. Yet by ensuring that the *exemplum* continues to be felt as *triste*, they also preserve it as *salubre*.'⁹ Certainly the later authors Valerius Maximus and

⁸ See Langlands 2008 on *severitas* as an ambiguous virtue.

⁹ Feldherr 1998: 110–111. Feldherr describes this as a 'doubled spectacle' (p. 111), though my own position might be less binary, and admit to more than two possible readings of the event. Feldherr also calls our attention to the issues of perception and fine judgment which we discussed in Chapter 5: 'If we, Livy's audience, have rejoiced in Manlius' success without perceiving its illegality, then the *exemplum* is as much for us as for the soldiers who were actually present' Feldherr 1998: 111. The young men who mourn his death and respond with revulsion represent the type of 'dissenting voice' – a technique discussed later in this chapter – that is often operational in sites of exemplarity and their remediations, as a means of dramatising their controversial elements. Skutsch (Skutsch

Frontinus both cite Manlius' story as a useful exemplum of military discipline, while not underplaying the horror of his act.¹⁰ The allusion to the Torquatus site once again exploits the internal contestation as a venerable heroic exemplum with inherently troubling aspects that prompt ethical reflection. It is more accurate (*contra* Skutsch) to see Livy's phrase *triste exemplum* as one that acknowledges this ambiguity: this is a heroic deed that has horrific implications. The adjective can plausibly be read as acknowledgment of the agony that such a decision must have entailed for Torquatus, without actually being critical of his decision itself.

Other references and remediations also make something of the moral complexity of the case, in their various ways. Another reference to Torquatus in Sallust's account of the Catiline conspiracy comes in Cato's speech arguing that the Roman senate must deal severely with the conspirators; here it is represented as simultaneously aspirational and troubling:

'In the time of our ancestors A. Manlius Torquatus in the Gallic war ordered his own son to be killed because he had fought the enemy contrary to orders, and he condemned that outstanding young man to death for his untrammelled bravery: will you hesitate about what punishment to inflict on the cruellest of patricides?'

'apud maiores nostros A. Manlius Torquatus bello Gallico filium suum, quod is contra imperium in hostem pugnaverit, necari iussit atque ille egregius adulescens inmoderate fortitudinis morte poenas dedit: vos de crudelissimis parricidis quid statuatis, cunctamini?' (Sall. *Cat.* 52.30–31).

The point that Cato is making here is precisely that killing his own brave and brilliant son was a really difficult, shocking decision to have to take but that Torquatus, in his heroism, was able to make it, even though it was so difficult; likewise, his fellow Roman citizens should not be cowardly and fail to take decisive action against the conspirators, who are after all so very much less deserving of leniency than the young warrior. He goes on to argue that, since some people might see such punishment as too harsh and

1985: 317) argues that Livy's version may be based on Ennius' treatment, which would suggest that this nuanced and controversial version can be traced back to the second century (cf. Goldschmidt 2013: 162).

¹⁰ Front. *Strat.* 4.40: 'Manlius, who afterwards had the cognomen Imperiosus, struck down his son with an axe after he had been beaten with rods in the sight of the army, because he had fought with the enemy in contravention of his father's edict, even though he was victorious', *Manlius, cui Imperioso postea cognomen fuit, filium, quod is contra edictum patris cum hoste pugnaverit, quamvis victorem in conspectu exercitus virgis caesum securi percussit*. Cf. Val. Max. 2.7.6.

not exercising due clemency, they need to stand strong with the courage of their own convictions, and not care too much about what other people think – as we have seen, this is a common exemplary motif. Thus Cato's allusion to this exemplum is exactly appropriate to the situation: it acknowledges that a difficult and even unpleasant action is sometimes necessary for the greater good, but that it is not always easy to take that decision, especially if you are surrounded by others who are urging a different course of action.

Cicero's reference to Torquatus in his speech in defence of P. Cornelius Sulla in 62 BCE functions in a similar fashion, referring to what we have seen is the consensus about Torquatus' status as a hero whose action is vindicated. Cicero's question is anticipating an answer in the negative, to make its point that his own killing of the Catilinarian conspirators is justified:¹¹

Does anyone criticise that most illustrious man of your family and name, who deprived his own son of life so that he might strengthen his command over the rest? Will you criticise the republic, which killed its internal enemies, so that it would not itself be killed by them?

an vero clarissimum virum generis vestri ac nominis nemo reprehendit, qui filium suum vita privavit ut in ceteros firmaret imperium; tu rem publicam reprehendis, quae domesticos hostis, ne ab iis ipsa necaretur, necavit? (Cic. *Sull.* 32).

The internal contestation and interpretative indeterminacy of this shocking story is made evident by its treatment by Valerius Maximus, who, in a single text, makes the nuances of the incident clear through alternative interpretations and perspectives. In his chapter *On Military Discipline* he introduces the deed as a glorious, though distressing, illustration of military discipline, which is *severissimus* ('extremely severe'); here he praises the act but also acknowledges the pain and loss suffered by the fathers who were compelled to punish their sons in this way (Val. Max. 2.7.6). In *On Severity*, Torquatus' descendant is praised for taking him as a model for virtuous severity, but there is the implication that the descendant transgresses what is strictly necessary (Val. Max. 5.8.3). In *On Anger* we are given the alternative critical perspective on the episode, when the young men of Rome refuse to come out and greet Torquatus on his victorious return to Rome because of his execution of his son. Valerius

¹¹ Berry 1996: 201–202 justly allows for this nuance in this reference, pointing out this is an argument *ex contrario*.

writes: 'He [the son] was pitied by his peers, because he had been punished too harshly', *miserti sunt aequalis nimis aspere puniti*. However, in his final comment on this version, Valerius distances himself from their critical response: 'I am not defending their action, but rather demonstrating the force of anger', *nec factum eorum defendo, sed irae vim indico* (Val. Max. 9.3.4).

Rather than viewing these various passages as a confusing collection of different interpretations, which make it difficult to grasp how the ancients themselves understood the story, we should think in terms of the productive and conflicting coherence of a site of exemplarity. All the ancient sources take for granted the basic consensus surrounding Torquatus – his deed is a great one that repays our consideration. The horror of his deed is an integral part of the story of this greatness, not only providing the arresting and emotive detail, but also highlighting the price that a great man pays for achieving greatness, which pushes virtue to the point where it borders on the transgressive, and sometimes tips over into vice. Negotiating these difficulties is part of what it means to be an ethically aware Roman. As in the case of Regulus, it is the troubling elements that are preserved in a site of exemplarity that render the story especially useful and sustainable as an ethical point of reference.

Manlius' exemplum, like Regulus', is associated with wider ethical anxieties, in his case not only about paternal strictness and discipline, but also more broadly about command and power and even empire, a cluster of ideas contained within the Latin term *imperium* that is closely associated with Manlius and enshrined in his cognomen Imperiosus.¹² In *De finibus*, Manlius is represented as someone who imposes impossibly exacting standards on others.¹³ In a declamation cited by Seneca the Elder, the accomplished speaker Montanus dealt with the topic of how many things the Roman people had put up with in its commanders, which included: *in Manlio inpotentiam, cui non nocuit et filium et victorem occidere*, 'violence (*inpotentia*) in Manlius, who was not condemned for killing his own, victorious son' (Sen. *Contr.* 9.2.19). Here Manlius is cited in a list of men who exhibit vices, yet Montanus also makes a point of reminding us that his act was not considered a crime, given its wider significance for the strength of Roman military command. Manlius' brutality was a vice to be borne by the Roman people, yet it was manifested precisely in the pursuit

¹² Livy 4.29; 7.4; Cic. *Fin.* 2.19; Val. Max. 5.8.3. On *imperium* as a term associated with Manlius, see Nisbet 1959 on Horace *Epistles* 2. Feldherr 1998 has some interesting things to say about *imperium*. See also Leigh 2004 on the way this story keys into debates about military discipline.

¹³ *Imperes* ('you command') is a key term here.

of his virtue. His must be read as an act whose exemplarity cuts in more than one direction.

Taking an overview of the extant ancient texts that narrate or refer to any particular exemplum, and reading them as remediations of a shifting, heterogeneous and contested site of exemplarity, enables one to have a clearer view of how the episode *qua* exemplum is able to deal with the political and social issues of ancient Rome. Seen in this light, the story of Manlius Torquatus constitutes not so much a definite illustration of a particular quality – whether of excessive strictness or of the ability to care more for military discipline than for one's own son – as it does an open question about discipline and its costs, which itself raises many other subsidiary ethical issues. The exemplum is not merely a statement that a Roman leader ought inevitably to place military discipline above his affection for his own son, but has the potential to be read as a challenging tale that dramatises the pain and difficulty of the conflicting demands placed upon a Roman leader, and indeed upon Rome as leader of empire.¹⁴ In other words, it executes the special capacity of stories to convey complex moral ideas rather than simple moral guidelines that we discussed in [Chapter 2](#).

When we view such an exemplary tale as a complex site of exemplarity that *as a whole* incorporates conflicting points of view and troubling ethical dilemmas, we are able to get a much clearer understanding of what each individual literary work is doing when it writes about, or alludes to, an exemplary tale. There is no longer any need to reduce a story such as that of Manlius' execution of his son to one that is either good or bad, or to categorise it as either a positive or a negative exemplum. Rather, we can take brief references such as those of Sallust and Cicero already discussed at face value as engagement with the site of exemplarity that appreciates the moral complexity of the deed. They rely on the assumption that the basic virtue of the deed is not in dispute, but also evoke a wider site of exemplarity within which there is the capacity to appreciate this exemplum as a tale about the terrible sacrifices that must sometimes be made for the greater good of the community. Indeed, an author can call on this exemplum as a form of shorthand for associated moral tensions and debates.

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For another illustration of how this approach can enhance scholarly understanding of Latin literature – and to introduce a new exemplary tale in the

¹⁴ My claim here is crucially different, therefore, from the interpretation of Leigh 2004, which sees this as a prescriptive exemplum encoding a moral rule that men should always put their country before their own family members.

process – let us consider the insightful analysis presented in 1979 by Joseph Solodow of Livy's account (at 1.26.2–14) of Horatius and the murder of his sister. The story, in my own summary, drawn from the accounts of Livy and Valerius Maximus (8.1.abs.1), is as follows:

Horatius' tale is set in the legendary days of Rome's early history, when the city was ruled by a king, Tullus Hostilius, and Rome was at war with the neighbouring city of Alba Longa. Horatius is one of three brothers who are chosen to fight against the three Curiatii brothers from Alba Longa, in a battle whose outcome will decide a boundary dispute between the two cities. After a bloody battle, he is the only one of the six young men who is left alive. He returns to Rome in triumph, carrying his spoils. As he enters the city he sees his sister; she is not joyfully celebrating his victory, but rather weeping and lamenting the death of her fiancé, who had been one of the Curiatii brothers slain by Horatius. Horatius is appalled that grief for a lover from another city should take precedence over joy at the victory of her city and her kin, and so he strikes her down dead. Horatius is arrested and put on trial for murder, of which he is evidently guilty, and he is convicted and about to suffer the penalty. But he appeals to the people of Rome who are won over by their hero's courage, and overturn his conviction. Horatius is released.

The final words of Livy's account make it clear that Horatius' acquittal is by no means a perfect resolution to the troubling tale: 'The people could resist neither the tears of the father nor the courage of the man himself, equal to any danger, and was won over more by admiration of his prowess than by the justice of the case. Therefore, so that the manifest slaughter should be cleansed by some sort of expiatory rite, the father was ordered to atone for his son's deed at public expense', *non tulit populus nec patris lacrimas nec ipsius parem in omni periculo animum, absolveruntque admiratione magis virtutis quam iure causae. itaque ut caedes manifesta aliquo tamen piaculo lueretur, imperatum patri ut filium expiaret pecunia publica* (1.26.12). On the basis of Livy's ethically complex treatment of this episode, Solodow writes: 'Livy seems to me a man of greater moral imagination and wider human sympathies than he is usually held to be. I will discuss here one episode from his history where he dwells precisely on the absence of clarity and on the resulting complexity of moral judgment.'¹⁵ Solodow's analysis demonstrates how carefully Livy structures his text in order to bring out the ethical complexity of Horatius' case and how he further communicates this complexity through the repetition of key vocabulary, which is given different colour at different points in the story. For instance,

¹⁵ Solodow 1979: 251.

the word *ferox* ('fierce') has a rather different feel in the heroic earlier battle scene, as an epithet suitable for a warrior, than when it is later used to describe his behaviour towards his sister: 'The echo leads to the important suggestion that it is the same quality which causes him to act on each occasion.'¹⁶ As Solodow notes, Livy's account not only leaves us unsure how we are to feel about Horatius as a Roman hero, and how far we are to value his actions, but actively promotes reflection on such controversy: 'Through the composition of the story and these verbal echoes Livy draws our attention to the problem which lies in the contrast between the halves. Horatius in the first half is a typical Roman hero, courageous and patriotic. But in the second half this same patriotic feeling leads him to kill his sister. The problem then is this: what are we to think of such a man, of such patriotism?'¹⁷ He concludes that the basis of Horatius' heroism, as described by Livy, is his willingness to sacrifice *suum* (what belongs to him) for the *publicum* (the public good).¹⁸ As we have seen, this is a common feature of Roman exempla, which, in weighing different commitments against one another, dramatises the ethical issues that are in discussion.

However, Solodow expresses concern about whether this ethical ambiguity can be an invention of Livy's, and if so, whether Livy's 'moral imagination' is quite as admirable as he – Solodow – would like to believe. He imagines an interlocutor objecting: 'Livy could not have intended the episode of Horatius to be a tale of moral ambiguity; he had little to do with shaping the story, which was simply handed down to him; the elements that create moral complexity were present all along in the traditional version.' He comments: 'This is a serious objection and seems well taken, for indeed the story does appear to be very strongly determined, containing perhaps as much that is "given" as any other in the early books.'¹⁹

In the light of my arguments, we can now see that Livy almost certainly *was* working with an existing site of exemplarity for Horatius that indeed already incorporated such controversy. Nevertheless, the nuanced and powerful expression and exploration of this controversy by Livy in this particular work is still a significant achievement in both literary and ethical terms. Even when moral complexity is embedded in the site of exemplarity, it falls to every author who provides a remediation of that site to draw out

¹⁶ Solodow 1979: 253. He identifies various other verbal echoes too: *increpans, horror, defigit/transfigit, corruerunt/corruerat*.

¹⁷ Solodow 1979: 254. ¹⁸ Solodow 1979: 255. ¹⁹ Solodow 1979: 261.

that complexity and its implications in their own way. Some remediations are more successful in articulating the implications than others, and, as Solodow identifies, Livy's treatment of Horatius is particularly skilful. He deploys here several literary techniques that he also uses elsewhere to similar effect. In addition to the techniques of structuring and verbal echoes identified by Solodow, as mentioned earlier, Livy also brings in issues of perspective and interpretation through a technique that will be discussed in this chapter as 'dissenting voices'. As Solodow puts it in his own analysis: 'By means of these sentences [where attention is drawn to the spectators of the unfolding events and their anxieties] reminding us of the presence and the reactions of the spectators, Livy induces us to view the story through their eyes. We seem to feel the same trepidation as the army, the same uncertainty about Horatius as the king and people. Livy's narrative, that is to say, contains within it both a moral problem and an *awareness* of the problem, an awareness which is transferred from the characters in the story to the reader.'²⁰

Solodow's close analysis of this passage of Livy is elegant and compelling, and I hope that my framework of controversial thinking has lent it new significance, by showing that such moral ambiguity was prevalent and significant in Roman exemplary ethics.²¹ Legal controversies surround this particular site of exemplarity, as we can see from its treatment in Cicero's early rhetorical work *De inventione*, where it appears as a familiar and controversial exemplum that is used as a touchstone for debates about when murder might be justified, for instance, Cic. *Inv.* 2.78-79, and Valerius Maximus' representation of the story as a court case (8.1.abs.1). The further point I want to make, however, is that Livy's treatment of Horatius' story is not alone in its skilful drawing out of the ethical issues.²² Literary remediations of sites that bring out their complexity in this way abound in Latin literature, and this chapter explores a range of instances. The precise techniques used to convey the ethical complexity of exempla differ depending on the genre, author and text in which the remediation appears. Livy, in his extended and elaborate narratives of exemplary stories

²⁰ Solodow 1979: 258. Cf. 'Tullius Hostilius, as depicted by the historian, is caught in a dilemma when Horatius appears before him, and this dilemma in turn highlights the problematic character of Horatius himself. For while Horatius feels only the patriotic motive, the king is sensitive to both the patriotic and the personal' (p. 255).

²¹ Another excellent discussion of Livy's treatment of the story is Feldherr 1998: 132-144, which brings out further ethical issues that are put into play by the episode, and also suggests its ambiguities and antitheses correspond to oppositional structures inherent in Roman religious institutions.

²² Cf. Langlands 2008: 167-168 for a brief discussion of how Valerius Maximus explores the ethical controversies at the heart of this exemplum in 8.1.abs.1.

such as this, uses narrative techniques such as structure, intratextual echoes, focalisation, or dramatisation of different moral judgments (as here in the persons of the father, the king, the people and Horatius himself). Elsewhere, as we have seen, he has his characters deploy exempla within debates to bring out their complexity, as do writers of philosophical dialogues and philosophical arguments, such as Cicero and Seneca. Meanwhile Valerius Maximus, in his concise rendering of exempla, often relies on evocative language, embedded *sententiae* and juxtaposition of exempla that play off one another in interesting ways to bring out the ethical controversies.

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If we now turn to the site of exemplarity surrounding the figure of the great Roman general Fabius Maximus, who rose to prominence in the Second Punic War against Hannibal, we will see that the controversial elements of the site are handled in different ways by Ennius, by Cicero, by the historian Livy, by Valerius Maximus, by the epic poet Silius Italicus and finally by Seneca in his treatise on anger.²³ Q. Fabius Maximus ‘Cunctator’ (‘The Delayer’) was a Roman consul, victorious Roman general, and one of the central figures of the Second Punic War, as well as a foremost exemplum from this rich period. At first sight, he is a less obviously ambiguous exemplary hero in the Roman tradition than those figures we have examined so far. This fact is useful in itself, since the presence even in this site of exemplarity of controversial elements helps to substantiate my claims about the importance of controversial thinking in exemplary ethics. Here I shall explore Fabius’ controversiality, the content of his changing site of exemplarity, and the ethical issues that it brings into consideration, and also look further at how our literary sources (especially Livy and Silius Italicus) handle these controversial elements of the site of exemplarity, and what techniques they use in their writing to enhance their ethical impact.²⁴ These include, in addition to the dialogues and debates that we have already seen in the [previous chapter](#), dissenting voices within the plot, varying focalisations of the events from the perspectives of different participants, and juxtaposed alternatives.

²³ For an overview of the sources for the Fabius story-tradition, and the core elements and narratives associated with it, see Roller 2011, Tipping 2010, especially [chapter 4](#). Key sources include: Ennius *Annales* 363–365; Cic. *De Off.* 1.84; Virg. *Aen.* 6.845–846; Livy 22; Livy 44.22.10; Val. Max. 1.1.5, 2.1.10, 2.2.4b, 3.8.2, 4.1.5, 4.8.1–2, 4.8.2, 5.2.3–4, 7.3.7, 7.3.ext.8, 8.13.3, 9.3.1; Silius Italicus *Punica* Books 7–9, Seneca *De Ira*.

²⁴ For insightful analyses of Livy’s and Silius’ treatments of Fabius’ career, see respectively Elliot 2009 and Tipping 2010 [chapter 4](#). Elliot argues that Livy directly takes Ennius’ line as a central motif for his treatment in Book 22.

The key elements of the story are as follows, in my own summary, which synthesises the accounts of Livy, Silius Italicus and Valerius Maximus:

The setting is the Second Punic War. It is 217 BCE and the Carthaginian general Hannibal has invaded Italy and has recently defeated Roman troops at the battles of Trebia and of Lake Trasimene – the latter a major defeat for the Romans. Hannibal is on the rampage in Italy, and the Romans are in dire straits: as an emergency measure they elect to the dictatorship Q. Fabius Maximus, hoping he will take matters in hand. Fabius takes his troops out into Italy, but throughout the campaign season he keeps them back from the fight, despite Hannibal's provocation. His men are impatient; they want the chance to prove themselves on the battlefield, they resent his keeping them safe back in the camp. Some begin to question his methods, whispering about indecision and cowardice. They wonder if he really has a plan at all and knows what he is doing, or whether he is actually just afraid to fight. Back in Rome the people are becoming anxious too: Hannibal is laying waste to Italy, Fabius is doing nothing to stop him. Why not? What was the point of making him dictator if he is just going to stand around and watch Hannibal destroy the country? So convinced do they become that his plan – whatever it is – is not working, that they decide to try and galvanise Fabius to action by appointing a colleague to share the command of the troops with him: the battle-ready M. Minucius Rufus, who is all fired up and raring to go. Arriving on the scene, Minucius is eager to take the battle to Hannibal, and so he leads his troops against the Carthaginians. Fabius waits and watches from a hill; he can see what is going to happen. Sure enough, Minucius has walked into a trap: he and his men are overwhelmed. It is up to Fabius to save the day, and so he does. And at this point the sensible Minucius realises the wisdom of Fabius, and is amazed at himself for having had the arrogance to think he deserved to share his command. The delaying tactic is now universally recognised as the right strategy.

The fundamental consensus about Fabius in the tradition is that he is a great general, and that his 'delaying' tactics were a highly effective military tactic against Hannibal.²⁵ The essence of this site of exemplarity is neatly conveyed by the famous line from Ennius, which is cited so often in later Latin literature: 'One man restored our state by delaying', *unus homo nobis cunctando restituit rem* (Ennius, Fr. 363).²⁶ Nevertheless, the

²⁵ Val. Max. 7.3.ext.8; Front. *Strat.* 1.3.3. Brief references in Latin literature to Fabius as one among a number of Roman heroes are too common to be listed here, but representative examples can be found at Cic. *Leg. Man.* 47, 60; Cic. *Pis.* 14, 20, 39, 58; Sen. *Clem.* 1.9.10: *cedo, si spes tuas solus impedio, Paulus ne te et Fabius Maximus et Cossi et Servilii ferent tantum que agmen nobilium non inania nomina praeferentium, sed eorum, qui imaginibus suis decori sint?*

²⁶ With citations or allusions at e.g. Cic. *Att.* 2.19.2; Cic. *Off.* 1.84; Ovid *Fasti* 2.241–242: *scilicet ut posses olim tu, Maxime, nasci, cui res cunctando restituenda foret*; Virg. *Aen.* 6.845: *quo fessum rapitis, Fabii? tu Maximus ille es, unus qui nobis cunctando restitues rem?*; Sen. *Ben.* 4.27.2 *quid ergo? et Fabius, qui 'cunctando restituit rem', temerarius est?*

problematic aspects of his behaviour are also very much a central part of the tradition surrounding his tale, and, therefore, of the site of exemplarity. Significantly, as always, it may not be immediately obvious where his greatness lies or what lesson we are to learn from his exemplum.²⁷ The key ethical conundrum associated with Fabius is conveyed precisely by the nickname that he acquires as a result of these successful campaigns: 'Cunctator' ('the Delayer'). As with the family *cognomina* Germanicus or Africanus, Fabius wins this name in recognition of his military success against a foreign enemy. However, instead of commemorating the site of success, his name commemorates the fact that *this* victorious general achieved his military success precisely by *not fighting*, but by hanging back, what Joy Littlewood has described as his 'equivocal virtue of *cunctatio*'.²⁸ Indeed, this line of Ennius is so striking and quotable because of the patent absurdity of the idea that a man might save his country by hesitating to act. Similarly, Valerius Maximus' description of his behaviour as 'extremely beneficial hesitations' (*saluberrimis cunctationibus*, 7.3.ext.8) highlights the outstanding effectiveness of Fabius' strategy, but in such a way as to bring out its oddity.

Once again, it is helpful that we are now able to conceptualise the tradition surrounding Fabius as a site of exemplarity, since this provides a theoretical underpinning for a treatment of all the surviving literary texts that mention Fabius as a coherent body of material, representing remediations of an evolving site. The methodology of this analysis is complex, since every Latin text that cites or writes about Fabius is both a constituent of the site of exemplarity, providing evidence about it, and at the same time a new remediation separate from and responding to the pre-existing site. We can never know, of course, what the site was like at any given time or for any given user or viewer of the site, and we are unable to access the oral and ephemeral elements that would have variously contributed to its make-up during its classical unfolding, and cannot know what they would add to our understanding.

For the tradition of Fabius Cunctator we are fortunate to possess the recent analysis of Matthew Roller, which treats it as a whole and complex tradition, to be reconstructed from a wide range of sources, with ethical complexity integral to this tradition from the start.²⁹

²⁷ The phrases *sollers cunctatio Fabi* (Livy 22.23.1) and *sollers cunctandi* (Sil. Pun. 7.91–92) even impute a degree of deception to his strategy.

²⁸ Littlewood (2011): lxiii. See also Elliott 2009 on Livy Book 22 as allowing the term *cunctari* to be 'variously appropriated and contested' (533) by different people throughout the book as a means bringing out its implications.

²⁹ Roller 2011.

Roller identifies three recurrent paradoxical elements in the tradition that he sees as remaining stable in the tradition from the time of Ennius: the name Cunctator itself, the motif of ‘winning by not fighting’³⁰ and the issue of what constitutes ‘real glory’ as summarised by the Livian paradox ‘he who scorns glory will earn true glory’ (*gloriam qui spreverit, veram habebit*, Liv. 22.39.20).³¹ His analysis shows very clearly that the conflicting elements in the story are not to be seen as separate and competing historical traditions (as other scholars might be tempted to view them), but rather an integrated dialogue that forms a whole complex story-tradition.³² Unlike this work of previous scholars treating exemplary tales of similar complexity, Roller’s study does not attempt to rationalise or reconcile the contradictions or paradoxes within our sources for Fabius; he recognises that they have ethical importance and that they are indeed fundamental to the enduring fascination of the figure of Fabius. His article, then, goes some way towards treating the tradition surrounding Fabius as what this book terms a site of exemplarity, and to outlining its inherent and ethically productive complexity. The framework developed in this chapter and in the [preceding chapter](#) enables us to appreciate the wider significance of Roller’s study. Not only do these chapters show that the pattern he observes is present throughout the exemplary canon, but this framework allows us to understand more fully why these Latin literary works so consistently write about exemplary heroes in this equivocating fashion and to grasp the productive role that they played in Roman ethics.

The indeterminacy is indicated, indeed, by the cognomen Cunctator, which is acquired precisely in order to commemorate this military tactic but whether as an honorific title or an insult is undecided.³³ So proverbial

³⁰ Cf.: *ergo ut Scipio pugnando et hic non dimicando maxime civitati nostrae succurrisse visus est: alter enim celeritate sua Carthaginem oppressit, alter cunctatione id egit ne Roma opprimi posset*. ‘So just as Scipio is seen to have saved our community, so he [Fabius] did the same through not fighting; one man with his swiftness crushed Carthage, the other through his delaying ensured that Rome could not be crushed’ (Val. Max. 3.8.2).

³¹ On this phrase, and on the theme of glory in Livy in relation to Fabius, see further Hardie 2011: 260–268.

³² As discussed in the [previous chapter](#), scholars have identified and analysed the various positive and negative strands within a tradition surrounding a particular figure, but they have tended to explain such complexity primarily in terms of aristocratic competition and the strategic retelling of stories to the advantage of particular leading families (if not in terms of actual historical ignorance and irresponsibility). I am thinking particularly of Harriet Flower’s recent article on Marcellus (Flower 2003) or of Mix’s book on Regulus (Mix 1970).

³³ On this uncertainty, see Elliot 2009: 533 and Roller 2011: 194–195; ‘*cunctatio* and its cognates can be enlisted on both sides of the debates about the ethics of Fabius’ strategy’ (195).

has this cognomen become as a source of praise that some ancient texts feel the need to de-familiarise their readers with its positive associations, and remind them of its equivocal significance, suggesting that the nickname might originally have been bestowed on him as an insult. Silius Italicus, for instance, dramatises this idea in Book 7 of the *Punica*, and describes Fabius' son as furious when his father is called by this name (*Pun.* 7.536); when Paullus tells Varro 'you think that Fabius is *cunctator et aeger*' ('hesitant and lazy' *Pun.* 9.52), it is clear that being a Cunctator is far from a glorious thing to be – it denotes indecisiveness and cowardice – and the same goes for Minucius' critical description of Fabius' behaviour at Livy 22.1.45. The name, therefore, embodies the contradictions that arise when one begins to evaluate Fabius' behaviour and to consider how it is perceived and evaluated by other players in the story.

A key anxiety within this site of exemplarity is that Fabius' behaviour appears in some respects to be contrary to certain core Roman military principles: that a soldier should be ready to risk his life for the sake of his country, to face any danger on the battlefield, and that he should be striving for glory and recognition from his fellow countrymen. Several ancient remediations bring this out by making it explicit that one of the reasons his contemporaries were opposed to his delaying strategy is that it deprived not just himself but also his soldiers of the opportunity of winning glory in battle, because they have to sit in the camp twiddling their thumbs. As Roller puts it: 'In letting fall what would ordinarily have been deemed a golden opportunity to lead Roman troops into battle and defeat a particularly fearsome and dangerous enemy, he deprived himself and his soldiers of the chance to display valor in battle, collect spoils, celebrate a triumph and gain the associated renown. He thus left himself open to the criticism of failing to manifest the values and qualities expected of a Roman general.'³⁴

This idea that Fabius' delaying behaviour may be at odds with the usual requirements of military spirit is elaborated with particular care and nuance by Silius Italicus; one technique he uses is that of the speeches through which he voices the attitudes of his different characters. In *Punica* Book 7, for instance, Silius gives Fabius a speech in which he attempts to persuade his men that delaying is a good idea. There he tells them that he is going to keep them safe whether they like it or not, and the clear implication is that they may well *not* like to be saved in this way:

³⁴ Roller 2011: 5.

'My plan of campaign has been long thought-through and is decided;
I will fight to keep you safe even if you don't want it and are keen to
go to your deaths. Not one of you will be allowed to die, if I can
help it.'

stat pensata diu belli sententia: vincam
servare invitos urgentesque ultima fata.
nulli per Fabium e vobis cecidisse licebit

(Sil. *Pun.* 7.223–225).

This last line has a wonderful jarring resonance to it, threatening and reassuring in equal measure.

The site of exemplarity surrounding Fabius Cunctator incorporates *as integral elements* dissenting or different points of view; that is to say, points of view that run counter to the positive moral evaluation of the hero that forms the consensus in a given present when an exemplum is being used. Central to the site of exemplarity is the sense that Fabius is at odds with everyone else in the episode: his own soldiers, common opinion, the senate, his colleagues. Fabius' delaying strategy was very unpopular and received criticism from his fellow Romans at the time; part of his heroism lies precisely in the ability to persevere with his plan despite this opposition. It was only in retrospect, once it had been proven successful, that his strategy was appreciated and praised.³⁵ The presence of these 'dissenting voices' in the site brings out Fabius' admirable qualities of patience, perseverance and confidence in his own judgment and abilities. The impatience, recklessness and mistrust displayed by others in the story represent even more of an obstacle for him than does the menacing figure of Hannibal. The fact that the bitterest enemy he faces is his own community is one factor in enabling this great general and his unusual military strategy to stand as a moral exemplum for leadership and decision-making more generally. We have already seen in previous chapters that heroes often stand alone and apart from the rest of the community, in their ability to act in a crisis. For Fabius, and some other exemplary figures, this solitude is intensified by the hostile opposition of the rest of the community, which passes judgment on their behaviour even as they act.³⁶ At the heart of the site of exemplarity lies Fabius' dilemma. He believes that Rome's

³⁵ This raises the issue of the extent to which the consequences of an act are or should be important to the moral evaluation of an act. In the Roman exemplary tradition, consequences sometimes are and sometimes are not important. This same issue continues to engage philosophers today; consequentialism is one model for how one should go about establishing the value of an act.

³⁶ See e.g. Val. Max. 5.3 *De ingratis* for men such as Camillus, Scipio Africanus, Scipio Nasica, P. Lentulus, and Gaius Servilius Ahala, whose devotion to their country and efforts on its behalf went unrewarded by their countrymen, and who ended their life abroad, whether in enforced or voluntary exile. For the motif of the lone hero, see [Chapter 1](#).

chance of defeating Hannibal's troops lies in holding off from the fight for the time being. He finds himself in a situation where serving his country as he thinks best will not win him glory and acclaim – at least in the short term – and will on the contrary attract criticism and censure. He prioritises the greater good of the commonwealth above his own immediate glory. Eventually, in the course of the plot, he will win glory, once people correctly evaluate his actions; however, in the meantime he has to find the strength to disregard public opinion and the opinion of his peers and rulers.

Those famous lines from Ennius' *Annales*, one of our earliest sources for the Fabius exemplum, provide a neatly compacted rendition of the tradition enfolding the opposition to Fabius and the dissenting voices within its verses. Here the dissent is concisely summarised in the word *rumores* – the rumours that he does not pay attention to because his priority is the safety of the state:

One man restored the state for us by hesitating,
and he did not place reputation before its safety,
therefore the glory of this great man shines out now and every after.

unus homo nobis cunctando resituit rem.
noenum rumores ponebat ante salutem
ergo postque magisque viri nunc gloria claret (Enn. *Ann.* Fr. 363–365).

In his *Punica*, Silius Italicus plays out the ethical implications of the exemplum of Fabius on a grand scale, and he develops the implications of this public opposition much more expansively, as befits an epic poem in which Fabius is a central character (as other critics have recognised and discussed from a variety of angles).³⁷ Silius' emphasis is shaped by the epic genre in which he is writing,³⁸ and he enhances the potential of Fabius' site with epic colour. For instance, deployment of the epic motif of heroic ardour for glorious death on the battlefield highlights the unusual perversity of Fabius' stance. Silius' treatment really brings into relief what is at stake in Fabius' decision not to engage immediately with Hannibal. Another recurrent theme in the poem is the question of whether the desire for glory should be counted as a valid motivation for action, a perennial focus for debate in Roman exemplary ethics.³⁹ The key Fabian issues of when to delay and when to act, and of what counts as good motivation, are

³⁷ See Tipping 2010, especially chapter 4 on Fabius.

³⁸ See Littlewood 2011, Tipping 2010 on epic elements in Silius.

³⁹ On this theme in Silius see Tipping 2010: 19–30. For Cicero's engagement with the issue see Gildenhard 2007: 168–187.

played out in many different episodes over the course of the poem, as various characters alongside Fabius either plunge in or hold back, with a variety of consequences. The issue of whether desire for glory and glorious death is problematic is explored from a variety of angles, and kept alive throughout the poem, circling around the central exemplum of Fabius.⁴⁰

According to Silius' elaborate account (*Punica* 7.504–514), it is the rumours (*fama furit*) flying among the people that put pressure on the senate to make the ill-judged appointment of Minucius. This passage from the *Punica* neatly sets out the misinterpretations of Fabius' motivations and of the situation as a whole that are doing the rounds (instigated, in the epic context, by the personification of troublesome *fama*).⁴¹ It shows clearly how Fabius' behaviour in its context is open to various different interpretations, and that it is possible to perceive it from some perspectives as anything but virtuous. For instance, it looks to the people of Rome as if Fabius is problematically failing to reward the apparent virtue and military success of Minucius – and indeed is even punishing it – in utter rejection of accepted practice. Even senators are affected by their *invidia* towards Fabius and are swayed by popular opinion. Earlier, at *Punica* 7.224, it is the 'unwilling' (*invitos*) soldiers who provide the dissenting voice, as we saw previously. Even when Fabius' strategy has been vindicated, Silius still allows characters within his poem to voice plausible misgivings about Fabius' techniques. For instance, towards the end of the *Punica*, in Book 16, Silius pits Fabius against the emerging hero Scipio Africanus in that debate in the senate about whether Scipio should attack Carthage. Here, as in Livy's *Histories*, with whose content and literary methods Silius is engaging throughout his epic poem, formal debate between two characters is used to highlight the controversial aspects of historical events cast as exemplary tales.⁴² During his speech, Scipio, while acknowledging that Fabius has been established as a great hero by general consensus, suggests

⁴⁰ Cf. Tipping 2010: 19, n. 25 commenting on the words of the Fury to the Saguntines in Book 2 and their resonance with the meta-poetic words of the narrator about *virtus* 4.603–604: 'One effect of the intratextuality might be to suggest that the pursuit of acclaim through excellence is, or can be, a kind of insanity'; cf. Tipping 2010: 98–100 and 159–160 on the complexities of *virtus* as intertwined with the representation of the personification of *Virtus* in Book 15 and with the exemplary figures of Hannibal and Scipio.

⁴¹ See Hardie 2011: 270–272 on this passage.

⁴² For discussion of Livy's account of this same debate, see the [previous chapter](#). Silius' version of the debate mirrors his Carthaginian debate between Hanno and Gestar in Book 2 about whether the Carthaginian senate should support Hannibal's attack on Saguntum or not, and hence, in practice, whether or not they should go to war with Rome.

nonetheless that his style of military engagement has its limitations. Indeed, Scipio expresses scepticism about the general applicability and effectiveness of Fabius' strategy, saying that, while sitting it out might be good enough for Fabius, it is not enough for him:

'The glory of not being defeated is splendid enough for cautious Fabius, and the Cunctator achieved it all by sitting still ...'

'... sat gloria cauto
non vinci pulchra est Fabio, peperitque sedendo
omnia Cunctator ...' (Sil. *Pun.* 16.672–674).

Scipio goes on to propose that he himself will try a different, more aggressive strategy that he thinks will be more effective for him. In other words, he is expressing the idea that what might be appropriate for one person in a particular context might not be appropriate for another; the principle of situational variability, so fundamental both in learning from exempla and in applying them to one's own life.⁴³

One benefit of historical exempla, as we have seen, is that the deeds they relate can always be assessed with the benefit of hindsight, proven to have been the right thing to do by their consequences and by the recognition of tradition. However, even though we know, with hindsight, that Fabius' strategy was righteous and successful, I would suggest that we are not supposed to dismiss out of hand the alternative perspectives of these other players. Indeed, these dissenting viewpoints are a fundamental feature of the site of exemplarity that enable moral learning. One of their functions is to draw readers or audiences of the story, who are encountering the story from a later present moment, back in time, to the point where the long-term consequences of Fabius' behaviour are as yet unknown, encouraging them to think about what the behaviour looks like from *that* perspective. For the negative judgments that are made by other people in the moment are not portrayed as entirely unjustified in their original context, and I would argue that later readers are not expected to judge them so. Rather, the criticism of Fabius and the initial lack of confidence in him, which have such a prominent role in the plot, encourage an appreciation of plausible responses to Fabius in his own day. It must be conceded that the dissenting positions *look reasonable* when judged in the moment; it would have been at least reasonable for his Roman compatriots, anxious about

⁴³ See [Chapter 5](#). In the extended narrative of his career that is handed down as part of this site of exemplarity, there are a number of episodes related that emphasise the unusualness of his strategy, and the way that they put him into conflict with various contemporaries.

Hannibal's activities in Italy, to worry that Fabius' strategy of delay was not having a useful effect. It would have been *prima facie* reasonable for them to judge that this strategy might be the result of cowardice or laziness, that it was not making a valuable contribution to the war against Hannibal, and that Fabius ought to step up and engage Hannibal in battle, as befits a conventional Roman military hero.⁴⁴ It would have been reasonable for them to suppose that sending someone out to do battle who had a bit more verve and energy was the right thing to do, and might turn Roman fortunes around. If we later readers had been there at the time, we might have thought along the same lines and made the same judgments about Fabius' behaviour. Viewed from the perspective of *the original temporal context*, without the benefit of hindsight, Fabius' delaying tactic is not obviously the right choice; this is precisely why it takes an exceptional hero such as Fabius to conceive it and to carry it out. One can discard the judgments of the Roman people about Fabius' motivations and his effectiveness as being just plain wrong, and as proven to be wrong by subsequent events and by the later evaluation of his actions in the tradition; nevertheless the site of exemplarity is carefully structured so as to show that the alternative positions are reasonable on their own terms.⁴⁵

For instance, as Silius Italicus brings out in his treatment of the episode, Fabius' own men are right to criticise Fabius' delaying tactic, from their own immediate perspective. They are right to complain that his decision not to engage with the enemy is preventing them from testing their mettle on the battlefield and therefore from winning the military glory that is an important incentive for them to fight. Their objection to the fact that he is keeping them in the camp and not allowing them to fight is not actually a misreading of his position. They have correctly understood some of the consequences of his actions; what they have failed to do is appreciate his priorities. They do not appreciate that he is prioritising the longer-term safety of Rome over short-term glory for himself and his men. They do not understand his overall motivations for keeping them out of the fight, or, if they do, they – understandably – do not share his priorities. Similarly, the passage describing the rumours that are flying around about the consequences of Fabius' behaviour (Sil. *Pun.* 7.504–515), which eventually persuade even the senators to turn against

⁴⁴ As we have seen is the case, for instance, with Corvinus and Curtius, Mucius, the Decii and so many other Roman heroes.

⁴⁵ See Sil. *Pun.* 7.504–515.

him and to divide his command with that of Minucius, demonstrates how counter-virtuous Fabius' behaviour looks from some (albeit mistaken) perspectives: it looks as if he is failing to reward virtue, and even punishing it, and not just virtue itself but the beneficial consequences of virtue – military victory.

Dissenting voices such as these are given a chance to sound within the site of exemplarity partly because they provide a means of taking us back to the moment of ethical decision-making and reviving the process of ethical deliberation. They are strategically effective elements of the site, which highlight ethical complexity and alternative possibilities in such a way as to enable readers vicariously to experience the challenges of the situation for themselves. When an exemplum such as that of Fabius is so famous and well-known, carbonised with the weight of tradition and cultural consensus, when it has been handed down as a heroic tale and as an example of great military strategy, this very certainty about its value can detract from the didactic potential of the story. His decisions and actions could come to seem so obviously and unproblematically virtuous and right as to require no further thought; they become unremarkable clichés, lose their traction and become slippery and unhelpful. Yet in fact Fabius' decisions required a great deal of thought, as Silius has him say: 'My plan of campaign has been long thought-through and is decided' (*stat pensata diu belli sententia*, Sil. *Pun.* 7.223). Later on, after the people give Minucius joint command with Fabius, Silius describes Fabius as 'thinking over many things to himself' (*multa putans secum*, Sil. *Pun.* 7.519). This phrase describes the conventional burden of the epic hero⁴⁶; like Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Fabius is alone in his leadership. However, there is also a sense in Silius' poem that the isolation has a further significance; Fabius is unable to talk to anyone else about his decision-making because his wisdom surpasses all others, and they are simply unable to appreciate what he is up to. In order to really grasp the significance of Fabius' actions we – the users of exempla – need to think hard too; the exemplum is not as simple and straightforward as it might at first appear.

The very critical strand of dissent in this story raises various issues about moral evaluation and judgment. The viewpoints expressed through these dissenting voices communicate a sense of how hard it is to evaluate heroic deeds correctly; to everyone else, Fabius' behaviour looks like cowardice and indecision. The salient point is that to others his behaviour as a general in the

⁴⁶ See Littlewood 2011, ad loc.

field looks quite justifiably, at least at first sight, as if it embodies the vices of cowardice and laziness. One lesson one might draw from this is that, while a hero stands apart from the crowd, the mob is incapable of discerning true virtue. Certainly, as the plot concludes with Fabius acknowledged now and forever as virtuous and endowed with eternal glory, these very critical viewpoints come to us already discarded and proven to be misguided. Ennius' line about Fabius, 'therefore afterwards and ever more now the glory of the man shone out' (*ergo postque magisque viri nunc gloria claret*, Enn. *Ann.* 365), brings out strongly the distinction between the negative judgments about Fabius that were made at the time (*rumores*) and the positive evaluation which is now transmitted to posterity as consensus (*postque magisque . . . nunc*).⁴⁷ However by emphasising the plausible nature of the misjudgments expressed in the dissenting voices, ancient authors are reminding us that at a given moment the true expedient may be hard to discern, and we should not rush to facile judgment. One might compare Silius on the election of the dangerous demagogue Varro, who is 'rushing towards a huge disaster' (*ingentique ruinae festinans*, Sil. *Pun.* 8.244–245); the election is described as 'a blind vote' (*caeca suffragia*, 255), whereby the misjudgment of the people has given Varro a place among the real heroes like the Fabii, Marcellus and the Scipiones (8.253–255). The point is not that all perspectives are equally valid and all judgments equally good, but that it is not easy to be sure in any given situation when one's own judgment is correct or incorrect.

Such dissenting voices also remind us, then, that the ethical choices that heroes make are not straightforward, and they give us a flavour of the difficulties that might have been involved in such decisions. As we have seen, Silius brings out this inherent aspect of the site of exemplarity surrounding Fabius by elaborating the positions of various players in the story: Fabius, his son, his men, his colleagues, the Roman rumour-mill. Different kinds of sources use other literary strategies to bring out the force of these dissenting voices. As we might expect, both historiography and epic make copious use of speeches, and especially paired speeches in debate, which are also related to the Roman tradition of *controversiae* and *suasoriae*, the debating exercises, with which I have argued Roman exempla are closely associated.⁴⁸ Livy's rendition of the debate between Fabius and Scipio about Scipio's mission to Africa is of course primarily a dramatisation of the exemplary stories and of the values of the two debaters Fabius and Scipio, within which the earlier exemplum of Regulus is deployed, as we saw in the [previous chapter](#). In our discussion of that passage we saw that

⁴⁷ Cf. Roller 2011: 183.

⁴⁸ Langlands 2008; see the end of [Chapter 7](#).

one important method for bringing alternative stories into play is having characters explicitly cite previous exempla, and make direct comparisons between exemplary stories and the plans or deeds of themselves or other people. For instance, in his speech at Livy 22.14.4–14, Minucius makes explicit comparisons between the situation in which he and Fabius find themselves and the earlier stories of Camillus, Caudium and C. Lutatius. In Silius' *Punica* 7.548–564, Fabius makes use of the Camillus story himself, in his consolatory speech to his son.⁴⁹ It is worth emphasising that although we can also read these passages as demonstrating how people use exempla to guide their decisions and to persuade others, for the wider audience and readership, one effect of such passages is to place different exemplary stories side by side for comparison. This is a widely used strategy for bringing out the significance and complexity of exemplary tales.⁵⁰

Livy provides us with a good example of how an author juxtaposes plausible alternative arguments in order to deepen appreciation of the ethical issues and values of Fabius' site of exemplarity. In his recent book on Livy's treatment of the Punic Wars, David Levene argues that by placing the account of Gnaeus Scipio's naval defeat of the Carthaginian fleet, whom Scipio takes by surprise in a sudden attack, immediately after Minucius' speech in favour of decisive military action (22.14.4–14), Livy emphasises the strength of Minucius' argument.⁵¹ Levene suggests that Livy uses this technique to show that there are perfectly good grounds for the Romans to mistrust Fabius' strategy, and that hesitation is by no means always the best policy. The lesson of Fabius' exemplum is thereby rendered more nuanced through this juxtaposition. The episode of the naval victory provides a 'juxtaposed alternative', which shows that the significance of our primary story – the virtuous delay of Fabius – is not unambiguous. As Levene comments: 'The narrative sequence . . . appears to show us . . . that an aggressive strategy such as that advocated by Minucius can be viewed as more desirable and successful than a passive one: the question is to determine the circumstances when it is appropriate to adopt each' (Levene 2010: 80).⁵² Once again, Livy has shaped and contextualised Fabius' story in a controversial and exemplary mode that makes it clear

⁴⁹ Jane Chaplin has explored in illuminating detail many of the places in the text where Livy has his characters use exempla in this way (Chaplin 2000, Chaplin 2010).

⁵⁰ As we saw in Chapter 5.

⁵¹ See also Chaplin 2000: 43–44 and 114–115. On Fabius and Minucius, see further Levene 1993 and Tipping 2010.

⁵² Levene's reading here also raises the important question of situational variability and the need to take into account the specific context and requirements of any particular situation, which are embedded in the exemplary tradition, see Chapter 5.

that the decision taken by Fabius was not immediately obvious as the only right one; his presentation (or remediation) promotes the idea that one needs to consider carefully before making such a decision and be aware of circumstantial factors. As Levene says, Livy draws our attention to alternative judgments and evaluations: 'For the moment, that question, as far as the Romans in Italy go, has a straightforward answer: abandoning Fabius' strategy will prove disastrous. But the narrative also shows us the potential for failure in that strategy, and we can understand better why the Romans are shortly to make so bad a judgment by abandoning it.'⁵³ That is to say, the alternative proposed by Minucius is perfectly sensible, at least at first view, and to recognise this is to acknowledge that taking the right decision is not easy and always needs to be the result of some serious moral evaluation.⁵⁴

Juxtaposed alternatives, then, are another means by which ancient texts bring the 'controversy' of exempla to life. Often – in real life, as in the exemplary tradition – there appear before a moral agent more than one plausible, apparently sensible or virtuous paths of action; it is difficult to choose between them (as the exemplum of Regulus makes clear), but it is clear that things will play out differently depending on which one we choose. In the Roman exemplary tradition, things often already have played out differently in other, related stories. For instance, the rash Minucius is a kind of double of exemplary heroes such as the Decii who are prepared to rush headlong into battle (cf. his description by Silius as 'blazing at the same time with desire for death', *simul et pereundi ardebat amore*, Sil. *Pun.* 7.526), but in his case the urgency to join in battle is potentially destructive, whereas for the Decii it was the salvation of Rome. Juxtaposition of these two exempla in the exemplary terrain highlights the need to distinguish between the right and wrong kind of eagerness for battle, to pay attention to the thin line between bravery and rashness, to think about when plunging into battle might be the right thing to do and when it might not be. So it is possible to see in the outcomes of alternative and similar stories the possible consequences of making different choices. Indeed, the careful study of possible alternatives and their consequences is

⁵³ Levene 2010: 80–81.

⁵⁴ Compare also the debates about whether or not prisoners of war should be ransomed in Livy Book 22, with the discussion of Chaplin 2000: 60–61. On p. 61 Chaplin comments: '[T]hrough [the audience's] conflicted response to the competing oratorical versions, the external audience comes to understand the agonizing decision the Romans face.' This is a good example of a scholar recognising that a story is 'controversial' and that the way an ancient author is depicting the story is serving to bring out the controversy and showing what an agonising decision the protagonist is faced with.

an important part of exemplary deliberation, as with the famous negative exemplum of the general who was forced to admit 'I hadn't thought of that'.⁵⁵

Within particular works of literature, juxtaposed alternatives also call attention to our need to nuance the message of one story by tempering it with the conflicting message of another. Within the wider exemplary terrain, stories are often transmitted as coupled or clustered together in order to provide this same effect of productive juxtaposition. So Fabius is associated within the tradition not only with Minucius, but also with Marcellus and with Scipio. We may celebrate Fabius' ability to delay and hold back from fighting, but we must simultaneously celebrate the ability of his heroic peers such as Marcellus or Scipio to act with decisive swiftness and plunge bravely into battle.⁵⁶ As, in Silius' version, Scipio makes clear himself, the same behaviour is not appropriate in every case, and there is a range of possible alternatives that need to be matched with the particular situation. Marcellus and Scipio are exemplary too, but in very different ways, and their exemplarity conflicts with that of Fabius in provocative ways. In the wider exemplary tradition, all these figures are presented as part of a complex of Second Punic War exempla in such a way as to produce a pallet of diverse possible ways of being a hero. Particular ancient texts regularly draw attention to this point through comparison. It is summarised by the snappy idea, which Plutarch attributes to Posidonius, that Fabius is the shield of Rome, while Marcellus is Rome's sword.⁵⁷ Valerius Maximus is among others who make similar comparisons between Fabius and Scipio: 'Therefore, just as Scipio is seen to have saved our community by fighting, so he [Fabius] did the same by not fighting; one man with his swiftness crushed Carthage, the other through his delaying ensured that Rome could not be crushed' (*ergo ut Scipio pugnando ita hic non dimicando maxime civitati nostrae succurisse visus est: alter enim celeritate sua Carthaginem oppressit, alter cunctatione id egit ne Roma opprimi posset*, Val. Max. 3.8.2).

This vital principle of situational variability that is raised by the juxtaposition of these stories is closely associated with the key issue of moral

⁵⁵ Val. Max. 7.2.2: Scipio Africanus used to say that the phrase 'I had not thought of that' was shameful; cf. Cic. *Off.* 23.81. The saying is elsewhere attributed to others, e.g. to Asellio in Gell. *NA* 13.3.6. This idea relates to the consequentialist approach to attribution of value to action.

⁵⁶ Both Scipio and Marcellus are, of course, complex exemplary figures in their own right, with their own controversial story-traditions (cf. Tipping 2010 chapter 5 on Scipio, Flower 2003 on Marcellus).

⁵⁷ Plut. *Marc.* 9.4 and *Fab.* 19.3; see also Cicero *Rep.* 5.10.fr.1 for a less snappy formulation of the same idea. Comparisons between Fabius and Minucius are found at: Livy 22.30.3; Sil. *Pun.* 7.398–400; Plut. *Fab.* 10.7 and 13.7.

judgment and evaluation; if Fabius' delaying tactic is obviously not the right thing for him, or anyone, to do in *every* situation, how is one to know when delay is appropriate and when it is not? Silius' version of Fabius takes up this challenge in the story-tradition, and writes this issue into the deliberative faculties of the character himself; it is not just that Fabius delays, but that he knows when to delay and when to act. This is underlined in his speech to his men in Book 7, where he expresses the idea that the right moment for fighting will come:

'When a favourable moment demands fighting, then I hope these fierce words of yours will be equalled by actions.'

'... cum optabile tempus
deposcet dextras, tunc ista ferocia dicta
aequantur factis ...'

(Sil. *Pun.* 7.234–236).⁵⁸

In his valuable article about the complex tradition surrounding Fabius, Roller acknowledges that conflict at the heart of the legend is important for its utility: 'It is precisely the conflicts of value and judgment that lie at the heart of the Fabius legend that makes him a useful exemplum; it is this that offers Roman social actors for centuries thereafter a touchstone with which to think through value conflicts in their own worlds.'⁵⁹ He also recognises the wider application of Fabius' exemplum, beyond the military context, suggesting that broader lessons about deciding when to act and when to hold back might also apply in a political context, for instance: 'Any military commander, and indeed anyone who could conceptualize his social persona in military terms, might someday need to consider whether he should "join battle" (i.e. "undertake the expected performance"), or pursue some larger end through different means, even in the face of censure by contemporaries. Fabius is "good to think with," and functions as an exemplum for subsequent Roman aristocrats, precisely because anyone might, in the course of time, face his own "Fabian moment."⁶⁰ I would go further; this recognition that principles might be translated between different contexts allows us to see the relevance of Fabius' exemplum to even more abstract and fundamental issues, such as questions about how one ascribes moral value to acts and how one goes about taking moral decisions, just as we have seen is the case

⁵⁸ When the time comes, Fabius is indeed able to be swift and decisive: *celer* (*Pun.* 10.593) once the need for waiting is over: *non ulla relicta est/credite, cunctando ratio* (10.594–595).

⁵⁹ Roller 2011: 5. ⁶⁰ Roller 2011: 6.

with the exempla of Regulus, Torquatus, Mucius, Curtius and Corvinus. In my view, Fabius' site of exemplarity provides stimulus and resources for engaging with some fundamental ethical issues that are of relevance to any kind of moral agent, and Silius Italicus takes up the invitation. These are universally relevant issues, and effectively this means that these exempla do not have to be useful only to the elite males in leadership roles who identify very closely with their protagonists. I take issue, therefore, with Roller and others who see this exemplum as having a rather narrow relevance to aristocratic ethics.

Silius' remediation of Fabius' story draws our attention to the important principle of situational variability, that behaviour that is right in one instance may not be right in another. It also, by the same token, promotes acknowledgement of the need for sensitivity to circumstances, both where one's own moral deliberation and decision making is concerned and when one is evaluating exemplary deeds. Silius' treatment of the story brings out the potential of the site of exemplarity to communicate the importance of being able to judge, when one is making a moral decision, what the specific requirements of one's situation are, and to tailor one's behaviour accordingly. His engagement with the site also dramatises, emphasises or explores a cluster of related issues concerning moral epistemology and ontology: how to recognise virtue, how to define virtue, where the boundaries lie between virtue and vice, and how, and by what criteria, one should go about evaluating actions.

Both Livy and Silius bring out these issues in a variety of ways (and of course Silius is drawing directly on Livy's account, and redeploying his techniques in the *Punica*). Both authors emphasise that the same action may look like cowardice to one onlooker and like carefulness to another. Both also raise the troubling issue that the actual action does not just look the same but actually *is* the same whether it is inspired by cowardice or caution. Some of Fabius' contemporaries think his behaviour looks cowardly and lazy; when we realise that he is holding back from engaging in battle as a deliberate and carefully thought out military strategy, we can call it cautious and judicious instead, but the problem is that we cannot be sure. At Livy 28.40.7, Fabius says that some call it *metum pigritiamque* ('fear and laziness') *primo aspectu* ('at first glance'), and think that other advice is *speciosiora* 'more splendid'; he alludes here to the idea of surface appearance, which will actually turn out to be misleading, but is easy to be taken in by,

because it looks so similar to genuine heroism.⁶¹ His colleague Minucius leads his men boldly into battle against Hannibal; his actions initially look like those of a classic brave and inspiring general, but once he has fallen into a trap and has had to be rescued by Fabius, we can see that they were in fact rash and motivated by a reckless desire for glory on the battlefield. Hindsight – a benefit which exempla always allow us – enables us to see what the consequences of the two men's actions were.

Silius provides a particularly rich and confusing representation of the possibilities of this topic, weaving the Fabius site of exemplarity in with many other ancient exemplary tales with which it resonates. He exploits the site's potential to raise important questions about the criteria by which one goes about judging whether a given act is cautious or cowardly, and where the line between the two might be drawn. It can prompt reflection on the criteria that one should use when attributing moral value to an act: Should you follow popular opinion? Should you trust the decisions of a man, such as Fabius, whom you have identified as wise and virtuous (by electing him dictator, for instance)? Should you scrutinise the probable consequences of his actions and make your decision based on this? Should you analyse his motives and intentions? Each of these suggestions represents a broad school of modern philosophical thought – consequentialism, intentionalism and virtue ethics. In practice, all of us implement various combinations of these approaches in our everyday lives in making moral assessments. It is clear that the Romans did too; this is evident, not least, in the way our ancient sources use exempla to explore ethical issues. Further, these can be seen as issues of perception (whether you have correctly understood the nature of an act) or as ontological issues (identifying the difference between caution and cowardice). Sometimes desire for death on the battlefield, heedless of all else, is (judged as) heroic and virtuous; sometimes it is (judged as) completely inappropriate and damaging. The challenge is how one is to make the judgment, and differentiate between the two, deliberating on the difference between bravery and recklessness, identifying the point at which bravery becomes recklessness, or caution becomes cowardice, deciding where the definitional lines are to be drawn. In other words, Fabius' site of exemplarity provides the material for exploring and addressing precisely the philosophical and meta-

⁶¹ This is similar to the difficulty that Cicero in his *De officiis* represents Regulus as confronting and overcoming: that of how to distinguish the genuinely virtuous path of action from that which merely looks very similar to virtue (Cic. *Off.* 3.99–113; cf. Langlands 2011).

exemplary issues that are raised by Seneca's letter to Lucilius, discussed in [Chapters 4](#) and [5](#).

The site of exemplarity surrounding Fabius also invites us to wonder what the relative merits and demerits of qualities such as bravery and caution are, and how we should go about prioritising different valuable things. It raises the issue of how one would go about deciding when one was appropriate rather than the other, and of what sorts of contextual issues need to be taken into account. As we have already seen, many – perhaps most – Roman exempla pose this question of the relative merits of *x* and *y*, and of how we might assess the value of one against the other. Many of the well-known and archetypal exempla represent someone who takes a difficult decision to sacrifice something extremely valuable for the sake of something else which he or she judges even more valuable: Curtius sacrifices his life for the military success of Rome, Mucius sacrifices his hand for Rome's safety, Torquatus and Brutus sacrifice their children for the sake of military discipline and political stability or freedom, Horatius sacrifices his sister for the sake of family honour. In Fabius' case one of the questions posed is about the relative merits of keeping one's men alive to fight another day, on the one hand, and on the other giving them the opportunity to fight and win glory there and then. The whole narrative of the Second Punic War – specifically as it is set out in the works of Livy and Silius, but perhaps also as it is constituted in the Roman exemplary terrain more generally – clearly raises this important ethical and pragmatic issue: Cunctator embodies the question of when it is best *not* to rush headlong into battle, and *not* to fight heroically to the death. There is no clear-cut answer, no general rule about military strategy that can be neatly concluded from careful observation of the events.

In the heroic tales that are handed down by Roman tradition, heroism is often about judgment: judgment about the relative value of valuable things, about what can be sacrificed and what must be saved, and judgment about the consequences of action and inaction, about which virtues are most important to uphold and about which acts best instantiate these virtues. Exempla model the same qualities of moral discernment, perseverance and decision-making that they are intended to inculcate; genuine heroic virtue entails taking terrible, momentous decisions of which ordinary mortals may sometimes feel they would not have been capable. By exploring the controversial aspects of their heroes' decisions, Romans

learned about ethical deliberation and decision-making, about moral judgment and evaluation.

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As we have seen, ancient authors often seek to do something new and surprising with familiar exempla, and to create an effect by citing exempla unexpectedly, so that what we get in the text is not the story or the interpretation that we were anticipating from our previous knowledge of the site of exemplarity. For instance, Valerius Maximus holds off from directly citing the exemplum of Manlius Torquatus at the beginning of his chapter on military discipline (2.7) when his reader is expecting it; however, he engages with that site of exemplarity productively through indirect allusion and by mobilising the strong association of Torquatus with the theme of military discipline that readers are expected to know. In order to make the most of the moral force of exempla that are cited here, the reader is required to engage actively in interpreting them through comparison with this unspoken example of Torquatus.⁶² In such unexpected treatment of exempla, we can perceive a balance between deep familiarity and innovative deployment that requires the active engagement of reader or audience. Such deployment serves the purpose of jolting us to attention and compelling us to examine a familiar reference more carefully than we might otherwise have done. Through such a reference, the text alludes to a shared site of exemplarity which readers or audience are expected to bring as their horizon of interpretation, and the recognised consensus is always lurking behind any innovative textual reference to an exemplum. On occasion, such working consensus may be made to clash with the treatment of that exemplum in a particular text in a productive and stimulating fashion.

A powerful example of this can be found in Seneca's use of Fabius' exemplum in his treatise on anger, where Seneca unexpectedly purports to cite Fabius simply as an exemplum of the control of anger, but in fact allows the exemplum to set up the interpretative framework for the entire treatise, playing the novel and engaging role of a metaphor for the whole process of learning how to gain control over one's emotions.⁶³

Seneca's first exemplum in this three volume treatise on anger is that of Fabius, which is introduced at 1.11, ostensibly to illustrate the claim that

⁶² See Langlands 2008: 170–173.

⁶³ On Seneca's use of metaphor in his philosophical writings, see Armisen-Marchetti 2015; here I would like to see an exemplary reference, with the narrative and structures that it evokes, as providing a metaphor that underpins Seneca's message about how and why anger should be controlled. On metaphors for anger in Seneca's writings, see Riggsby 2015.

even in war anger is not useful and should be repressed and avoided. A hypothetical interlocutor suggests: 'but against the enemy anger is necessary' (*sed adversus hostes . . . necessaria est ira*, Sen. *Ira*. I.II.I), and part of Seneca's answer is to provide examples of famous generals who did not rush into battle, but knew how to wait:

How else did Fabius restore the weakened forces of the empire other than by knowing how to delay, to drag things out, and to wait, all things of which angry people know nothing? The empire would have perished, since it was then *in extremis*, if Fabius had dared to do what anger was urging him to do: he took into consideration the public weal, and, having made an estimation of its forces – it could afford to lose nothing without losing everything – he buried his grief and desire for revenge, intent only on expediency and taking the opportunity; he conquered anger before he conquered Hannibal.

quo alio Fabius affectas imperii vires recreavit, quam quod cunctari et trahere et morari sciit, quae omnia irati nesciunt? perierat imperium, quod tunc in extremo stabat, si Fabius tantum ausus esset quantum ira suadebat: habuit in consilio fortunam publicam et aestimatis viribus, ex quibus iam perire nihil sine universo poterat, dolorem ultionemque seposuit in unam utilitatem et occasiones intentus; iram ante vicit quam Hannibalem (Sen. *Ira* I.II.5).

This is an unexpected use of Fabius' exemplum. He is not usually associated with the idea of anger or the repression of anger, and elsewhere in the tradition there is no suggestion he is affected by emotions of anger or revenge that need to be suppressed in order for him to pursue his strategy of delay.⁶⁴ Indeed the 'delaying' that he deploys against Hannibal is usually represented as a coolly deliberated military strategy. Seneca begins, however, with a sleight of hand in which he draws a parallel between military strategy and anger control, by directly contrasting qualities from each sphere as if they were directly comparable: on the one hand the ability to hold back from attacking the enemy during war, and on the other hand the impulsive nature of angry people. This provides a dovetailing of the emotional and the strategic within which Fabius' exemplum can be seen to fit here in this particular passage, but it also sets up a close metaphorical association between the control of anger and the practice of prudent military command that will structure the entire treatise.

Seneca's subsequent citation of the exempla of Scipio Africanus and Scipio Aemilianus is even more surprising. As we have seen, Scipio

⁶⁴ Cf. Roller 2015a: 83–95 for his discussion of Seneca's representation of Fabius here.

Africanus in particular is usually positioned in opposition to Fabius, as the bold and daring foil to Fabius' caution, within a pattern that balances the virtue of decisive action against the virtue of waiting. Here, the two Scipios are unexpectedly represented as other versions of the Fabius exemplum. As Matthew Roller puts it: '[T]he received Scipionic exempla have been entirely reengineered to resemble Fabius', and he describes 'the attraction [Fabius] exerts on the representation of the Scipios'.⁶⁵ Both Scipios are also represented as using delay to achieve their military ends, and the phrases used to describe them overtly recall Fabius' well-known site of exemplarity.⁶⁶ Seneca allows this first series of exempla to catch the reader's attention particularly, by citing them in an unexpected context, where they do not fully match the principle they are ostensibly illustrating, and also by claiming for them a significance that is not usually associated with them; indeed, in the case of the exempla of the Scipios the fit is uncomfortable:

And what about Scipio? Having left behind Hannibal and the Carthaginian army and all those with whom he had reason to be angry, did he not transfer the war so slowly to Africa that he gave the impression to ill-wishers of self-indulgence and laziness? And what about the other Scipio? Did he not besiege Numantia for a very long time, and bear calmly his own distress and the public distress arising from the fact that it was taking longer to conquer Numantia than Carthage? But by surrounding and besieging the enemy he drove them to the point where they fell by their own swords. Anger, therefore, is not useful even in battle or in war; for it is prone to rashness, and it is not careful about dangers, even while it seeks to attack them. It is the truest virtue which looks all around for a long time, and is in control, and sets off slowly with a clear destination.

quid Scipio? non relicto Hannibale et Punico exercitu omnibusque, quibus irascendum erat, bellum in Africam transtulit tam lentus, ut opinionem luxuriae segnitiaeque malignis daret? quid alter Scipio? non circa Numantiam multum diuque sedit et hunc suum publicumque dolorem aequo animo tulit, diutius Numantiam quam Carthaginem vinci? dum circumvallat et includit hostem, eo compulit, ut erro ipsi suo caderent. non est itaque utilis ne in proeliis quidem aut bellis ira; in temeritatem enim prona est et pericula, dum inferre vult, non cavet. illa certissima est virtus quae se diu multumque circumspexit et rexit et ex lento ac destinato provexit (Sen. *Ira* 1.11.6–7).

⁶⁵ Roller 2015a: 85.

⁶⁶ Cf. the description of Scipio as 'so slow that he gave the people the impression of laziness', *tam lentus ut opinionem . . . segnitiae . . . daret* (Sen. *Ira* 1.11.6) and 'he bore his own suffering and the public suffering with equanimity', *hunc suum publicumque dolorem aequo animo tulit* (Sen. *Ira* 1.11.7), discussed by Roller 2015a: 83–85.

We have seen in earlier discussion that Seneca is happy to manipulate or bring new elements into an exemplum to make it fit his argument. It is easy to label this a ‘rhetorical’ technique and see it as a means of wrestling slightly recalcitrant exemplary material into shape so that it better serves the needs of the framing argument.⁶⁷ However there is more to it than that: in this case, Seneca is deliberately deploying well-known exemplary stories where they do not easily serve the immediate argument and deliberately manipulating them in heavy-handed fashion in order to allow them to serve the overarching arguments of the treatise. He is engaging with the consensus in the sites of the exemplarity in a creative way in order to enhance his own messages about the control of anger, by exploiting Fabius’ profound association with the idea of beneficial delay and circumspection. In the treatise as a whole, one of the key strategies proposed for dealing with anger is that of delay.⁶⁸ ‘One must always give oneself time’ (*dandum semper est tempus*, 2.22.3), Seneca advises, so that one is not led to draw false conclusions too hastily about the injury or slight one has suffered; ‘Some false impressions look like the truth’ (*quaedam enim falsa veri speciem ferunt*, 2.22.3). Delay is beneficial not only because it allows the anger’s heat to die down, but also because it allows the mist that is clouding one’s judgment to thin or disappear, so that one is able to make a better evaluation of the situation (cf. *iudicet* at 2.29.1):

But the greatest remedy for anger is delay, so that its first fervour dies down and the mist that presses on the mind either subsides or becomes less dense.

atqui maximum remedium irae dilatio est, ut primus eius fervor relanguagescat et caligo quae premit mentem aut residat aut minus densa sit (Sen. *Ira* 3.12.4).

Elsewhere Seneca describes the distinction between Reason and Anger in terms that echo distinctions in the exemplary terrain between Fabius and Minucius, or Fabius and Scipio: ‘Reason gives time to either side of the issue, then seeks advocacy on behalf of itself as well, so that it has the space to shake out the truth; anger rushes in’, *ratio utrique parti tempus dat, deinde advocacy et sibi petit, ut excutiendae veritatis spatium habeat; ira festinat* (1.18.1). Just as ‘anger rushes in’, Minucius is the precipitate warrior

⁶⁷ For the distinction between framing argument and exempla, see Roller 2015a.

⁶⁸ Cf. ‘The best cure for anger is delay’ (*maximum remedium irae mora est*, 2.29.1); on this, see Riggsby 2015: 123. On the other hand, at 3.1.3 Seneca calls delay (*mora*) a slow remedy for a fast evil that should be used only as a last resort (cf. 3.12.4).

who wants to lead his men into battle without thinking things through, while Fabius is able to devote some time to finding the right moment.

If metaphorical language reflects deeper structures of thought within a culture, my argument here is that, far from a 'paranarrative' that is subsidiary to the main argument,⁶⁹ Seneca presents Fabius' story here as a new kind of metaphor that carries the overarching argument itself. The salient motifs that it conveys precisely match the stages in the Stoic model of emotion which sees it as arising from false 'impressions' received by a person, who then either rejects or assents to those impressions; once a person has assented, these impressions agitate the motions of the soul which in turn affect body and behaviour.⁷⁰ The story of Fabius in the wider site of exemplarity represents the importance of taking time to deal with misleading impressions about what is happening that lead one to jump to false conclusions; the need to make correct evaluations of the situation; the importance of turning the false ideas away before you allow them to make an impression on you; the importance of not acting straightaway but taking time to assess the situation. The wider exemplary terrain in which Fabius is contrasted with the hot-headed Minucius also reflects the idea expressed elsewhere in the treatise that some characters are more receptive than others to anger (2.19.1: *opportunissima ad iracundiam fervidi animi natura est*). These themes work in conjunction with the close association between anger and the military that runs through the work. As cited here, the exemplum of Fabius serves as an important plank in Seneca's treatise in a way that is entirely independent of the immediate context in 1.11 of the utility or otherwise of anger in a military context. First, Fabius' well-known strategic delay in a military context functions here as an important model for the usefulness of delay in the context of mastering the emotion of anger as well. The metaphorical association between war and anger is emphasised frequently in the succeeding books, in ways that keep recalling this programmatic exemplum of Fabius to mind.

In addition, this initial sequence of exempla, once again quite apart from its rhetorical function in the immediate argument, plays another persuasive role in Seneca's treatise. For within this sequence we see the textual enactment of precisely the process of suppression of precipitate emotion to which Seneca is exhorting his reader. The force that Fabius' exemplum of delay and control of anger exerts on the other exempla in the sequence, whose heroes are usually seen as more precipitate, replicates the process of control of anger that the treatise is designed to teach. The sequencing of the

⁶⁹ Cf. Roller 2015a: 91 on exempla as paranarratives. ⁷⁰ Riggsby 2015: 113.

exempla conveys the impression that the Scipios have modeled themselves on Fabius, and learned from him how to control their anger. Seneca's treatise works on the level of logical argument, but this argument is complemented by the use of narrative persuasion: the dramatisation of anger control through this initial sequence of exempla, the dramatisation of his own anger as growing and then checked through his representation of a series of distressing anecdotes in Book 3,⁷¹ and especially by placing this attention-grabbing exemplum of Fabius near the start of his work, so that its associations in the wider site of exemplarity – with the challenges and value of delay – function throughout as a kind of controlling metaphor for the entire work, and the overall idea of how and why one should control one's anger. The final description of the virtue that stands in opposition to anger strongly brings out the military metaphor, where the moral agent is like a wise general who familiarises himself with his terrain and proceeds with caution.

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For a final example of how Latin authors play creatively with sites of exemplarity, we return to Silius Italicus and his treatment of the exemplum of Regulus in the early books of the *Punica*. Although his fate is not part of the main narrative of the *Punica*, since he fought and died during the First Punic War some thirty years earlier, Regulus is actually rather a prominent figure in the early books. In the first six books of his epic poem, Silius comes back to the exemplum of Regulus several times, focalising the exemplum through a series of different perspectives and thereby allowing the reader access (both sequentially and simultaneously) to multiple interpretations of the exemplum. Silius' particular treatment of the exemplum sets in motion a cluster of ethical debates that arise from his story, such as what constitutes a glorious death, how one distinguishes between defeat and victory, the ethics of capture, the relationship between suffering and virtue, and the question of what constitutes the virtue of *fides* (loyalty) and what its limitations are.⁷² Silius' handling of this exemplum also sparks off interactions with many other exempla that are cited or narrated in the poem, and these interactions further develop such ethical debates.⁷³ For instance, throughout the poem Silius keeps returning to

⁷¹ As noted by Roller 2015a: 89 with n. 25.

⁷² *Fides* is one of the key themes of the epic as it is of Roman conceptions of the Punic Wars in general – the story sets Roman *fides* in opposition to Carthaginian *perfidia*. See Tipping 2010: 19–20. For a useful discussion of Regulus and *fides* in the *Punica*, see Augoustakis 2010: 156–195.

⁷³ Silius interweaves the Regulus exemplum with the stories of the smiling slave of Tagus, of Mucius and of the people of Numantia and Saguntum, as well as with the figure of Vibellius Taurea.

the idea that there is no clear distinction between glorious death and humiliating defeat.⁷⁴

Silius' handling here of the figure and fate of Regulus conveys the important meta-exemplary message that an exemplum can look very different from different perspectives and can mean different things to different people. We have seen that this principle of the close relationship between focalisation and interpretation of exempla is an important one in Roman exemplary ethics, conveyed in ancient literature in a range of ways.⁷⁵ Silius' treatment also brings out nicely the internal dissenting voices that exist within the site of exemplarity (of the Carthaginians and of his friends and family) in such a way as to engage his reader in consideration of the key ethical questions. During these first six books, various different characters talk about Regulus and think about him in different ways, allowing us to read the exemplum through the eyes of different people in the narrative and setting up a stimulating problematics of interpretation. He is first focalised through the eyes of the Carthaginians on opposing sides of a debate in the Carthaginian senate. Next his capture is represented on Hannibal's shield, again from Carthaginian perspective, as a scene of Carthaginian triumph. His story is then told in flashback as a heroic narrative of Roman *fides* by his friend Marus. Next his death is represented among Roman triumphs in the frieze at the temple at Liternum, but as viewed by Hannibal. The final representation of him in the poem is by his wife Marcia, who, in her emotional speeches, interprets his tale as a story of betrayal and abandonment of her.⁷⁶ In addition to the fact that, taken together, these add up to a sequence of contradictory interpretations of Regulus' fate, Silius also inflects each of these individual passages with discordant notes, so that each interpretation is itself simultaneously called into question.

⁷⁴ Many of the men whose deaths he describes (e.g. Decius and Aufidius) suffer humiliating deaths, yet Silius writes them up like heroes. The central and significant episode of the suicide of the people of Saguntum raises particularly poignantly the issue of the perennial difficulty of distinguishing between the right and wrong kinds of motivation for behaviour. In that episode *Fides* (Loyalty) and *Furor* (Madness) both urge the Saguntines to kill themselves, encouraging the same behaviour but for very different ends. Does it matter in the end why they killed themselves? On one reading, this is indeed the *only* thing that matters – that they acted out of loyalty and virtue. Another reading might be that the reasons for suicide don't matter once they are dead. The latter counters the strong insistence on the importance of motive in Roman exemplary ethics, yet Silius' vivid and disturbing account certainly makes it hard to be absolutely sure that this still stands.

⁷⁵ See [Chapter 7](#) for discussion of the way this principle is conveyed by Martial and by Valerius Maximus.

⁷⁶ *Pun.* 6.437–449 and 6.500–520. On Marcia's speeches, see the discussion of Augoustakis [2010](#): 156–195.

Our first encounter with a reference to Regulus is when he is cited by the warmongering Carthaginian Gestar as an exemplum, not of Roman morality, but of Roman *mortality*. As the Carthaginians debate what their strategy should be against the Romans, and whether they should agree to lift their siege of Saguntum, Gestar cites Regulus' grim fate – which he claims to have witnessed with his own eyes – as evidence that Romans are mortal, and that it is possible to defeat them and humiliate them. He claims that he himself witnessed Regulus being dragged off to prison with his hands bound behind him and then strung up on a cross, and he uses this to prove his argument that it is possible to defeat Romans:

'He is mortal, believe me, although [Hanno's] cold heart
May tremble with shameful fear – the enemy we are engaging is mortal.
I myself was a witness when Regulus, defeated, with hands bound in chains
Behind his back, was dragged before the cheering mob
Into the darkness of prison – that hope and trust of Hector's race;
I was a witness when, hanging on the wooden cross,
He gazed out across Hesperia from his sublime heights.'

'mortalem, mihi crede, licet formidine turpi
frigida corda tremant, mortalem suminus hostem.
vidi ego, cum, geminas artis post terga catenis
evinctus palmas, vulgo traheretur ovante
carceris in tenebras spes et fiducia gentis
Regulus Hectoreae; vidi cum robore pendens
Hesperiam cruce sublimis spectaret ab alta'

(*Pun.* 2.338–343).

This is not a traditional, heroic interpretation of Regulus' fate or the lesson one might expect to be drawn from the episode from a Roman perspective. However, as we have seen in the [previous chapter](#), these elements of shame and defeat are present and even conspicuous in the site of exemplarity, and it is not implausible or illogical to draw such a lesson from the scene that Gestar has witnessed: Regulus has indeed been defeated in battle, captured alive, paraded in chains, thrown into prison and then (in this version) crucified in full view of the city. Gestar's interpretation dwells on the moments of Regulus' defeat and his death and chooses to find its significance there. Moreover, it is rhetorically appropriate for the setting, and Gestar's rhetoric does indeed win the day, persuading his colleagues to take a hostile attitude to Rome, in the confidence that it is possible to defeat the Romans.

We might have expected, however, that the description of Regulus' humiliating death would end with his exposure on the cross to the jeering mob which had followed him through the streets earlier in the passage.

Instead we find a small and perplexing twist: at the last moment the perspective literally shifts from the sneering Carthaginian to Regulus himself; Regulus is a sublime figure, on high, looking out over the whole of Italy. In this last line Regulus almost appears as a triumphant figure, surveying his domain.⁷⁷ This final image with which Gestar leaves us colours Regulus' death with a note of triumph, and with the idea that he is rising above adversity and suffering. This is, of course, unexpected in the immediate and specific context of Gestar's speech, yet at the same time it is consonant with the wider site of exemplarity with which we, and Silius' readership, are familiar.

The representations of Regulus by his nearest and dearest in the poem are similarly compromised. The account of Regulus' fate by his close friend Marus is highly laudatory, yet it also contains an element of *suasoria* in which Marus tries to persuade Regulus to stay in Rome.⁷⁸ While he praises Regulus, therefore, he also represents another form of dissenting voice, expressing the wish that Regulus' story could have turned out differently and that Regulus' steadfastness could have been melted by his family so that he would have allowed himself to take advantage of the *ius postliminium*. Marus also claims, troublingly, that Regulus was captured because he was led astray by his desire for glory: 'the firebrand of an righteous mind – desire for glory – caught and carried away the hero, that and mistaken confidence in fickle Mars' – *abripuit traxitque virum fax mentis honestae / gloria et incerti fallax fiducia Martis* (6.332–333), and he describes Regulus' captivity as 'a disgrace to you, Mars' (*dedecus, o Gradive, tuum!* 6.340). Regulus' wife, here called Marcia, while being his closest and most devoted relative, also represents an even stronger 'voice of dissent'.⁷⁹ Unhappy because of Regulus' paradoxical 'excessive virtue' (*nimis virtus* 6. 404), Marcia undermines Regulus' status as an exemplum of *fides* by accusing him precisely of a lack of loyalty towards his own wife: 'Where are vows you gave and the loyalty you pledged to our marriage now, you traitor?' (*data foedera nobis ac promissa fides thalamis ubi, perfide, nunc est?* 6.517–518).⁸⁰ Her self-interested claim that it is not right for a man to

⁷⁷ Compare the virtue of the lofty heights which the path of virtue allows you to reach and look down from at 15.106–107: *mox celsus* . . .

⁷⁸ E.g. 6.377: *spes tamen una mihi*. On Marus' flashback as 'a great example of a *suasoria*', see Augoustakis 2010: 162.

⁷⁹ As she is described by Antony Augoustakis (Augoustakis 2010: 179).

⁸⁰ Cf. John Jacobs' succinct summary on his web-based commentary to book 6 (www2.cnr.edu/home/sas/araia/Silius_Punica6.html): 'Silius consistently hails the Roman consul and general as *spes et fiducia gentis* / . . . *Hectoreae* and as *exemplum fidei*. And yet, in the excursus, the poet provides us with a different perspective on Regulus: not his public *fides*, but his private *perfidia* toward his wife.'

ignore his duty to his own wife and children, while it clashes with the celebration of his *fides* towards his country and towards the gods, is hardly an indefensible one. Indeed, there are many places in the epic where duty towards one's wife and children is represented as paramount.⁸¹ Moreover, as in the case of Fabius and his soldiers, Regulus' own determination to act virtuously deprives his wife of the opportunity of exerting her own virtues; she is unable to show her virtuous *fides* towards him.

Silius' descriptions of the two visual commemorations of Regulus' fate on Hannibal's shield and on the frieze of the temple at Liternum are also both complicated by what Don Fowler has shown to be a complex play of focalisations.⁸² It is already significant that Silius represents this episode as one that is celebrated and commemorated by *both* the Romans and the Carthaginians, each side claiming the episode to be a triumph of its own. Hannibal's shield contains scenes of Carthaginian history, the city's founding and its moments of triumph, including that over Regulus, and Hannibal is delighted by these: 'Triumphantly, he surveyed the details with delighted eyes and rejoiced in the origins of the realm' (*per singula laetis/lustrat ovans oculis et gaudet origine regni*, 2.404–5). However, in the case of Regulus, Silius introduces alternative focalisation into this very description, ending the description of the scene of his death, with a suggestion of Regulus' virtuous loyalty, his exemplarity, and the model that he will provide, in due course, for the Saguntines, who will kill themselves rather than submit to Hannibal's army:

And as to the left side of the shield, carved in high relief
 A Spartan cohort filled it; they were led in triumph
 By the victor Xanthippus, from Leda's city Amyclis.
 Nearby Regulus hung, a grim glory, under the image of punishment,
 And he gave great examples of loyalty to the city of Saguntum.
 But a happier sight was around it . . .

necnon et laevum clipei latus aspera signis
 implebat Spartana cohors; hanc ducit ovantem
 Ledaeis veniens victor Xanthippus Amyclis.
 iuxta triste decus pendet sub imagine poenae
 Regulus et fidei dat magna exempla Sagunto.
 laetior at circa facies . . .

(2.432–437).

The striking dissonance is that an episode that is included as a celebration of Carthage, and where Xanthippus is described as *victor*, also describes Regulus as providing great examples of loyalty to the city of Saguntum –

⁸¹ Notably, of course, the siege of Saguntum. ⁸² Fowler 2000.

a city, we should remember, in front of which Hannibal is standing as besieger, even as he revels in this gift of the shield. In these final lines of description Regulus is described in soundly Roman terms, as virtuous and exemplary, and moreover the focalisation here is through Hannibal's current enemies, the people of Saguntum, whose perspective – as the audience of his exemplum, who are learning from his precedent – we take on. By using the term *laetior* ('happier') to transition to the following description of a hunting scene, Silius also hints at the sorrow and distress that are part of Regulus' fate (and will be part of the Saguntines' fate in due course). Once more, this focalises the scene through the eyes of those who sympathise with Regulus and mourn his suffering and loss, rather than through the eyes of his victors, who are delighting in his humiliation. And yet, in a further interpretative twist, if we read the phrase 'he gave great examples of loyalty to the city of Saguntum' from the perspective of Hannibal, we might hear an undertone of jeering triumphalism, because the inhabitants of Saguntum are about to be defeated by Hannibal and commit mass suicide and slaughter of their families rather than betray Rome, so their loyalty will merely hasten their destruction by Hannibal; by following in Regulus' footsteps, the people of Saguntum might be seen to be playing into Hannibal's hands with an ultimately futile gesture of loyalty.⁸³

The final appearance of Regulus at the end of Book 6 is in the ecphrasis of the temple paintings at Liternum; once again these are seen through the gaze of Hannibal, but this time he is angry, as he looks upon images that have been created to celebrate the Roman achievements in the war (6.653–716). This scenario of Hannibal viewing the frieze in an Italian temple is evidently intended to generate a frisson reminiscent of that generated by Aeneas' survey of the frieze in Juno's temple in Book 1 of the *Aeneid*, and in particular to evoke the issues of interpretation and perspective that were generated by the Virgilian intertext, and its engagement with themes of focalisation, the representation of defeat and victory, human suffering and the experience of war. As Don Fowler has pointed out, there is a similarly complex 'play of focalisations' going on in this passage of the *Punica*, as we interpret the images now through Hannibal's eyes, now through the eyes of the Romans who created them, now through the eyes of the Romans of Silius' day who

⁸³ These anxieties about the efficacy of the Saguntum mass-suicide, and the extent to which it represents an act of virtue or an act of self-destructive madness, are brought out strongly in Silius' depiction of the event itself, in which the Saguntines are urged on by the twin figures of Madness and Loyalty.

know that the treaty with the Carthaginians that is being celebrated here will subsequently be ruptured, and so on.⁸⁴

As Fowler says: '[I]t is the representation of defeat and conquest that raises the most interesting questions of focalization.'⁸⁵ In the case of the Virgilian scene where Aeneas stands in the temple built in honour of his enemy the goddess Juno, and runs his eyes over scenes from the Trojan war (Virg. *Aen.* 1.453–493), we are invited to ask how the significance of, for instance, a depiction of one warrior killing another might be understood differently depending on how the depiction is focalised. Whether one reads these scenes as scenes of triumph or defeat depends on which side one identifies with, the Greeks or the Trojans. Is the scene of Achilles dragging Hector's body around the city walls Achilles' moment of glory, or the tragic death of Hector? Famously, Aeneas, reading as a Trojan, reads with empathy for his defeated comrades, and interprets such paintings as displaying a reassuring sympathy with their grief and commemoration of their heroism. Yet knowing that Juno's hatred for the Trojans is behind the city's defeat and is the driving force behind the poem itself, Virgil's readers are all too aware of the possibility of alternative readings, celebrating the Greek victory and glorying in the humiliation of warriors such as Hector.⁸⁶ The victor's triumph is simultaneously the defeat of the conquered; they are two sides of the same coin. In the case of the depiction of Regulus on the temple at Liternum, there is a further twist to this question of whether a picture is showing victory or defeat, since the simultaneous defeat and victory are represented in the same protagonist – just as we have seen is the case for the wider site of exemplarity upon which Silius is drawing here. The image represents both a piteous moment of defeat by a cruel and sadistic enemy and at the same time Regulus' ultimate *triumph* – over pain, over death and over the Carthaginians. From this Roman perspective of commemoration of Regulus as a hero, his triumph is not merely the other side of the same coin, but an act of reclaiming the episode as a completely different denomination. Regulus' defiant attitude – like that of the smiling slave or Mucius in similar circumstances – announces to the Carthaginians that what they are celebrating as *their* moment of glory is actually his. The ecphrastic passages in the *Punica*, and especially this scene at Liternum, clearly make the point that when we look on the

⁸⁴ Fowler 2000; for the phrase 'play of focalizations', see p. 99.

⁸⁵ Fowler 2000: 103.

⁸⁶ Barchiesi 1999.

image of Regulus strung up on a cross or being tortured, the significance of this image is not inherent in the image itself, nor even in whether the viewer identifies as Roman or Carthaginian. Such an image, and hence such as episode, needs to be interpreted and the nature of the interpretation – whether we see perhaps a man defeated and humiliated by his enemy, or a Stoic sage who triumphs above it all – will depend not only on who the focaliser is, but also on what they want from it at that particular moment.

As this book has argued throughout, Romans – at least those with a basic education – were trained to think about the interpretation of exempla in this way, and likely to be attuned to the significance of this play of different focalisations that is here mobilised so energetically by Silius. The reader's awareness is further enhanced by the preceding references to Regulus already discussed, beginning with the refreshing perspective of Gestar's 'dissenting voice', which provides us with a forcefully negative reading of the exemplum; all of these references call attention to the interpretability of Regulus' story. As with the dissenting voices of Marcia and Marus, Silius uses these various versions of, and responses to, the story to alert his reader from the start to the moral complexities of Regulus' story, and to invite us to consider such questions as the nature and limitations of loyalty, or what counts as a glorious death, and to wonder about how we attribute value to things such as life, physical wellbeing, freedom, family, or country, as well as a whole knot of tricky ethical issues around the ethics of the treatment of prisoners of war, ransoming, keeping and breaking oaths and so on.

Silius engages with the existing, controversial site of exemplarity using all the poetic techniques at his disposal; in the preceding discussion we have seen him deploy ecphrasis, allusion to Virgilian epic, deviant focalisation, and emotive speeches. All these familiar epic techniques are used here, as we have seen, to draw out the complexity of the issues that the site of Regulus puts into play. This site of exemplarity lies behind the poem just as significantly as does, for instance, the epic tradition; an appreciation of this enables us to come to a clearer understanding of what Silius is trying to achieve by handling Regulus' story in such a way. In addition, within his overarching epic infrastructure, Silius brings many different exempla into dialogue with one another in order to further enhance their moral capacity, making reference to, and exploiting for poetic ends, the complex exemplary terrain within Roman cultural memory.

Situating literary references to exemplary tales within this exemplary terrain, which exists both through and outside specific textual remediations, enhances our appreciation of their role in Latin literature. This and previous chapters have endeavoured to give a sense of the rich complexity of each of the sites of exemplarity with which our literary texts are engaging when they make reference to an exemplary figure or tale and thereby mobilise the tradition surrounding them. The exemplary terrain is a fertile one; such references are never one dimensional, and always have the potential to evoke ethical complexity in an instant. One lesson we may take away is not to underestimate the allusive potential of even the simplest reference to a Roman exemplum in a Latin text. Some exempla, like that of Regulus, are well-known, and we possess fairly detailed and nuanced accounts in the ancient literature. In those cases, it is easy to see allusions to a complex narrative that lies behind a text. Yet often a reference is little more than a name, as we have seen. A supporting footnote in a modern edition may refer us to a passage of Livy and inform us that the event in question took place in 235 BCE; the more casual the reference, the less attention we modern readers are likely to pay it. In such circumstances we are likely to miss the powerful presence that this episode had in Roman cultural memory, and to underestimate its capacity to evoke a network of ethical issues and ideas with which Romans themselves would have been familiar.

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Even when they may not be obviously controversial in isolation, one of the important elements of Roman exemplary ethics, as we have seen, is that each site is also situated in a wider exemplary terrain. Even if the story of Valerius Corvinus that we explored in [Chapter 1](#) is in itself a relatively simple tale of heroism, it also belongs to a broader tradition of exemplary tales about bold single combat that already pluralises its significance, and brings into the picture alternative and slightly variant tales such as that of Torquatus and his son, whose juxtaposition has richer ethical potential. Within the wider exemplary terrain, Fabius is juxtaposed with a number of different exemplary figures, including Hannibal, Scipio, Minucius, Marcellus, and from an earlier time Fabius Rullianus, Camillus and many others. Clusters of exempla like this make the ethical import of each individual exemplum richer, and offer the equivalent in cultural memory of the ‘juxtaposed alternatives’ we have observed at work within literary texts.

This chapter has attempted to convey a sense of this wider terrain and to show how literary allusions to exempla can often be multidimensional, bringing many different related sites of exemplarity into play at once. When we read Latin literature we should be able to hear a great deal of exemplary noise behind the text itself, if, that is, we have drunk the hero's blood and are privy to the secrets of Roman exemplary ethics. We have discussed several instances of authors who work with skill and subtlety to bring out the ethical potential of sites in the exemplary terrain, drawing not only on the controversiality inherent in each site of exemplarity, but also on the webs of allusion between exemplary tales, between alternative versions, and between alternative interpretations.

Conclusion

Above all, this book aims to have made a strong case for Roman exemplary ethics as philosophically interesting, nuanced, coherent, and relevant to discussions of moral education and ethics in the modern world.

It is true that ancient Roman writers talk of exempla in terms of imitation and avoidance, and this model is an important aspect of Roman exemplary ethics. However, those same authors who describe exemplarity in this way also make it abundantly clear through their own deployment of exempla and the way they describe them being used by others that this is not a simple, mechanistic process. To take one last example: in his treatise on anger, discussed in the previous chapter, Seneca uses the ‘avoid and follow’ formula: ‘Those should be considered as exempla which you must avoid, these next on the other hand as those which you must follow’ (*et haec cogitanda sunt exempla quae vites, et illa ex contrario quae sequaris*, Sen. *Ira* 3.22.1). As we saw however, his actual deployment of exempla within this treatise is extremely complex, and they are made to function at a variety of different levels: from the more immersive to the metaphorical. The apparent simplicity of this emulative model of learning, juxtaposed with the complexity of the way that Seneca actually deploys exempla in this treatise, provides the perfect riposte to the idea, prevalent in post-Classical scholarship, that it was only in the Early Modern period that things got interesting with exempla. Indeed, Seneca repeats this basic formula about how exempla are applied to moral development, through following or avoiding models of behaviour, at precisely the point in his work where he demonstrates how much more exempla can do in the way of teaching and persuading than this rather mechanistic formula implies.¹ Lyons has described the early modern period as one in which the practice of exemplarity outstripped its theorisation, and suggests that while early modern writers continue to repeat the formula ‘imitate and

¹ See discussion in the previous chapter.

avoid' in relation to exemplary learning, in fact authors such as Machiavelli, Marguerite de Navarre, Montaigne and Descartes can be observed to use exempla in far more interesting and sophisticated ways.² This book has sought to demonstrate once and for all that a creative, critical and imaginative deployment of exempla was taking place in the Roman period as well, and pervaded Latin literature.

I have shown that Roman exemplary ethics shared many of the qualities of the virtue ethics that were articulated and theorised by Aristotle in the fourth century BCE.³ In several important respects, the account of Roman exemplarity given in this book is analogous to Nancy Sherman's account of Aristotelian habituation as a critical practice with a cognitive element.⁴ However, it brings to this abstract theorising a practical dimension that allows it to flourish as a lived ethics, continually putting these abstract ideas to the test. It therefore also makes an important new contribution to virtue ethics as articulated by Aristotle. Aristotle's approach to ethics is a particularising one, and he does theorise the role of *paradeigmata* (examples) to an extent. However, he does not use examples very much, and he certainly does not have recourse to a large body of widely familiar moral exemplars, such as we find in the exemplary heroes of Roman culture. This gap in Aristotelian virtue ethics is filled by Roman exempla. Its practical orientation as a lived, working moral system that engaged extensively with 'real' examples marked Roman exemplary ethics out from the more abstract theorising of Greek virtue-ethics, and added a new, pragmatic, particularised dimension to ethical debates. Roman exemplary ethics encoded awareness of many of the key philosophical issues debated by ancient Greek philosophers and offered pragmatic ways of dealing, in particular circumstances, with perennial ethical challenges. It combined a persuasive function (where exempla are used as exhortations to virtue and models for virtue) with the inculcation of a form of practical wisdom akin to Aristotelian *phronesis*, which promoted a critical and independent approach to ethics. As paradigmatic figures and stories, Roman exempla contributed a particularism to virtue ethics that enabled members of Roman culture to identify and use moral qualities. In the Roman context, this particularism also enabled them to apply moral guidelines and principles in a nuanced and appropriate manner, and to cope when these are in

² Lyons 1989, esp. 16–17, also summarised in Herdt 2010: 110.

³ See Chapter 5 and Langlands 2015a for a preliminary articulation of these ideas.

⁴ Sherman 1989, chapter 5 and especially pages 176–183; 1997: 241–243.

conflict with one another.⁵ This, as much as anything, is their most significant contribution to Western ethics: dramatising, testing and exploring abstract moral concepts through their narratives about particular events.

Roman exemplary ethics possessed a strong community dimension, through the shared stories that were transmitted as cultural memory. The same principles that are described by Aristotle through abstract exposition are conveyed in Roman exemplary ethics by the exempla themselves. In this context and through this narrative medium, these moral principles can be grasped by people who would find philosophical writing harder to engage with, and by people who might struggle to articulate them in abstract terms. In Roman culture understanding of these principles and of the dynamics of exemplary and virtue ethics are disseminated widely through this cultural memory in the exemplary terrain, available widely and across the social hierarchy, encoded in these familiar sites of exemplarity, constantly evoked through brief references in speeches, private conversations, public monuments, and explored through a wide variety of literature: declamation, public speeches, epic, epigram, elegy, historiography. Roman exemplary ethics has exceptional richness and social scope.

I hope that the account of Roman exemplary ethics offered by this book has the potential to make a contribution to the study of 'exemplarist virtue' and virtue ethics in modern philosophy. The extended analyses of how exempla functioned within Roman culture as useful tools in an ongoing process of moral learning and personal development throughout a lifetime, and of their deployment within many individual works of literature, across many different genres, provide a level of concrete detail in the study of exemplary ethics within a particular culture that should provide a useful comparison and model for studies of exemplary ethics in other cultures. This work identifies some particularly important features of Roman exemplarity: the emphasis on outstanding people and their stories; the fact that they are real-life stories as opposed to fiction; the need for multiple exemplars; the need for exemplars to be widely shared across the community. All these features are also beginning to be recognised as important within the contemporary virtue-ethical models delineated by modern scholars. In addition, Roman exemplary ethics may have something to

⁵ We might compare the way that case studies are used today in some branches of moral thinking such as medical ethics and law, as individual instances that test and refine principles; such case studies have less of a heroic colour to them than our archetypal Roman exempla, and are used in the generation of new knowledge, but they play an important role in practical ethics.

contribute to modern educational practice. A significant aspect is that Roman exempla are well-fitted to delivering a form of moral education that is based on values and virtues but without being morally authoritarian, which emphasises shared values but leaves space for debate and diversity; here, ancient Rome may provide a useful model for approaching ethically inflected liberal education today.

Finally, returning to the discipline of Classics from which this study has emerged, I hope that this overview of exemplary ethics has gone some way towards demonstrating how ancient works of literature are continually engaging with a rich exemplary terrain that lies beyond the text, and to offer numerous tools and materials for reaching a better understanding of Latin literature, reading it within this wider, extratextual context.

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